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STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET

stories

A.M.C.

3- Strange World Starts
1- **DOBBIE'S** quest
with **DOBBIE**
BRYAN BERRY
4- **THE** PANGLOSSY MAP
2- **GOBBLEING**
3- **THE** FINAL VENTURE

Madness - gurgurgh madness - struck
Mary when the radiant **EMILEY** landed
OH MESMERIST FROM MIMAS!
A Unique Novel by **ROGER DEE**

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Title: Groundling

Date of first publication: 1953

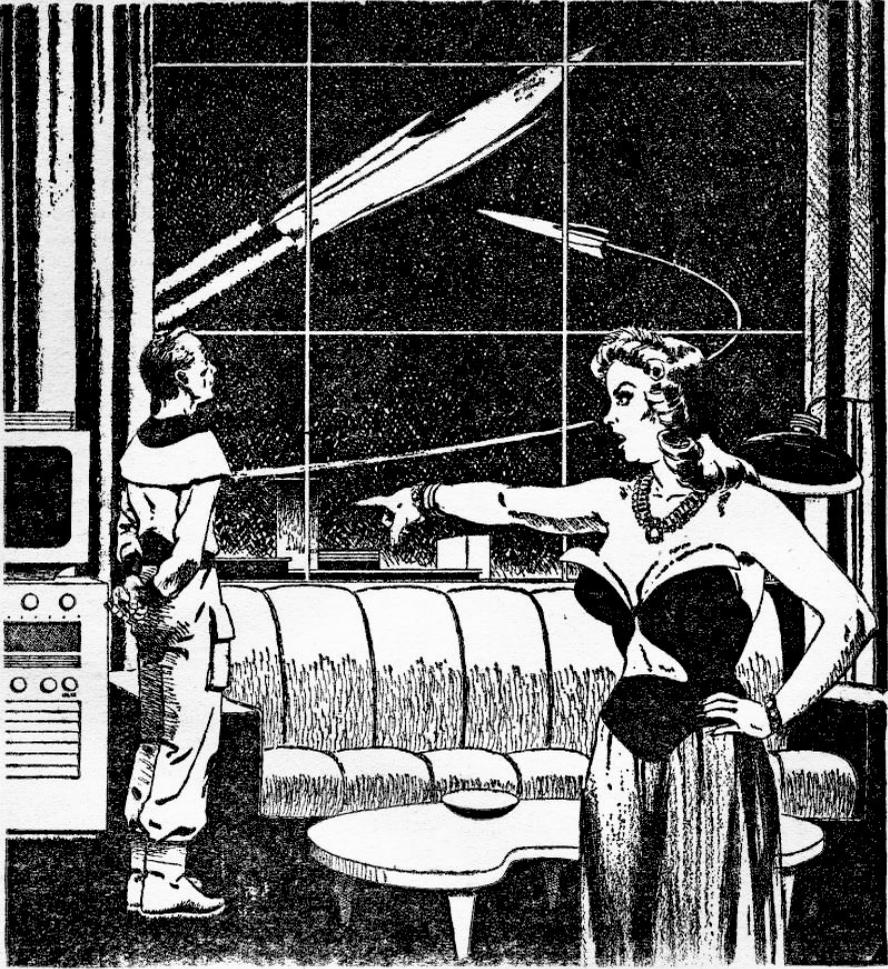
Author: Bryan Berry (1930-1966)

Date first posted: Apr. 26, 2021

Date last updated: Apr. 26, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210470

This eBook was produced by: Greg Weeks, Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>



Oh, to be out there, thought Larry. Out there, way up in space where there would be no one to nag.

GROUNDLING

By
BRYAN BERRY

First published *Planet Stories*, January 1953

With immense ease Larry could call up scenes of the depths and vastness of space, and the rockets darting like silver humming birds through the eternal dark. For Larry was a groundling . . . a henpecked groundling with a daring plan.

“The way you leave ash about on the carpet, Larry, really!”

He sighed and turned the page of his book, not looking up.

“Anyone would think the autocleaner does everything, the way you go on. Don’t forget I have to work the thing.”

He raised his eyes, then, keeping his fingers in his book. “I’m sorry,” he said, simply.

She sat opposite him in the soft cloud-rubber chair, rocking gently back and forth within its soothing pulsations. She was bigger than he was; bigger, fatter, sterner, stronger.

She scowled again. “I think you make more work for me on purpose.”

He knew quite well that it would be no use denying it. Through the years since their marriage in 1989 he had come to learn how useless it was to deny any of her accusations.

A rocket roared up from the spaceport beyond the house, but all he heard was a gentle humming; that was all that the soundproofed walls let through. Once he had been able to hear the bellow and the churning of the great silver vessels roaring off for Mars or Venus. Then she had said that the noise disturbed her and had made him have the soundproofing installed.

He pressed the stub of his cigarette into the ash tray and watched the metal arm jerk the tray to the wall, disappear through the tiny hatch and return the tray, empty, clean, polished.

There was another gentle humming as a second rocket passed over. He stretched out his legs and gazed up at the crystal window, watching the blazing trail of red and green fire burning its way through the midnight blackness. Oh, to be out there! Oh, to be through with all this and to be away out in space where there was no one to nag, no one to worry you, no one to tell you not to drop ash on the carpet.

Her harsh voice cut in, severing the dream.

“Do you know you’ve done nothing all evening except read that stupid book on space travel and look out of the window and sigh? I should have thought you were old enough to have got over all those crazy ideas about being a spaceman.”

He looked at her without really seeing her, and started to light another cigarette.

Her eyes grew cold as she watched him, the pupils sharpening to needle points as she glared at his hands fumbling with the packet. “Remember what Dr. Allison said—too many cigarettes are bad for your lungs.”

As he was employed on the ground staff at the spaceport he was allowed into the Rameses bar. At one time it had been reserved for spacemen only, but the rule had been ignored by almost all of the ground staff anyway, so in the end they decided that they might as well let them in officially.

He sat in his favorite seat in the corner with a glass of beer in front of him. He was waiting for the crew to come in from Mars as they always did, once every month. He knew the exact moment they would land, every time, and always he came to the Rameses to listen to their tales and drink with them. And always, too, he felt the same excitement, the same tenseness before they came in with their gold braid and their fine blue uniforms. How strong they looked! How clean and straight and purposeful! He sipped his beer reflectively and thought back to the last time he had talked to them. What wonderful stories they had had to tell.

The door banged open and in they all came.

There was Peters and Ericson and Mallard and all of them. All tanned with spaceburn, all walking with the strange and careful tread that every spaceman got after dealing with odd gravities and no gravity at all.

Peters waved to him. “Hey there, Larry.”

He raised his hand acknowledging the greeting.

“What are you drinking? Beer? Fine.” Peters ordered beer for them all and they gathered round the table. Some of them looked at Larry with something like pity in their eyes; and perhaps a little contempt, too. Here was a man, their eyes said, who had never been outside this one little world; here was one who had never been up into space or experienced the strange and beautiful weightlessness, never seen the red Martian deserts, never seen the stars hanging like portholes in the velvet midnights without the twinkling of atmosphere. Here was a groundling.

“Where did you go this trip?” Larry asked, eagerly. He knew, of course. He asked only to make them start at the beginning, force them by his questions to describe everything so that he might savor it down to the last tiny detail, feed on it as you would feed on a five course meal, washing it down with the rare red wine of the spaceman’s jargon.

So he sat there quietly, did Larry, listening to the harsh and crackling voices of Peters and Ericson and the others. Their words were conjurations and invocations, summoning visions of red Mars and green Venus, calling up scenes of the depths and the vastnesses of space and the rockets like silver humming birds darting in the eternal dark.

Peters was speaking. “That’s the third trip to Mars we’ve made in succession. Not that I don’t like Mars, mind. I do. It’s just that I’d rather be off on one of these experimental flights. I hear that they’re going to try sending a ship to Mercury soon. I want to be on *that*.”

Larry looked up, turning his glass in his fingers. “Mercury?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What about the heat?”

“I imagine they’ll dish out asbestoleum suits and land in the Twilight Belt. It should be a wonderful experience.”

Larry looked away quickly. Despite the fact that he would not miss these meetings for the world he always felt saddened when he heard the men speak of their next trip.

The evening wore on. He had told his wife that he would be working late interviewing the crew. He told her this each month and, probably because he said the same thing so regularly, she believed him.

At last the rocket crew got up to leave, all except Peters. Goodbyes were said, leather belts strapped on again. Glasses drained and peaked caps set on at jaunty angles.

The door banged after the last of them.

Peters turned to Larry. “Well, old man, how goes it?”

How many times has he asked that question, before, thought Larry? And how many times have I had to give the same answer?

“The same as ever,” he said.

“She still goes for you, then?”

“She still goes for me.”

Peters chuckled a quiet chuckle to himself, the sound coming softly above the hum of conversation, above the clink of glasses in the bar.

Larry looked up. “Did you hear that they’re trying to relax the law against married men taking jobs on the rockets?”

“No!”

“Uh-huh. There’s a bill going through at the moment.”

“Well, well, well, I wouldn’t have thought they’d do it.”

Larry scowled. “Why not? What’s wrong with the idea? They didn’t try and stop married men flying in ’planes, did they? Why stop them going on the rockets?”

Peters looked at him soberly. "Because, old man. Just because."

"Because what, though?"

"Because rockets are still new. Space is still new. The planets are still new. We're playing at rocketeering, Larry. While we're playing there's no room for anyone with responsibilities."

"You sound like a text book."

"Perhaps I do. It's true nevertheless."

"So you say."

"It *is* true."

Outside the roar of the rockets; bellowing, triumphant in the night. The rockets screaming off into the skies, causing heads to turn upwards; causing people to shudder in their sleep, dreaming; causing small boys, watching from their bedroom windows to gasp and clutch at the metal window ledges tightly, oh, tightly! Always the harsh and majestic tearing sound of the silver ships blasting off and landing to rip the night into a million glittering fragments and cast it up toward the far stars.

"Well, I must be going."

"Yes."

"You're lucky. You can sleep where you want to."

Peters laughed hollowly. "The novelty palls after a time. Sometimes I wish I had a wife."

They got up and paid for their drinks.

"You've got all space for a wife," said Larry as they went out.

As he walked from the railcar towards his house the guide lights along the path extinguished themselves behind him with his footsteps. In the porch he whispered his name at the lock and the door moved aside. He went in.

The house was still. As it should be, he thought. When she knew where he was she didn't wait up. His feet made no sound on the rubber stairs.

In the bedroom, he undressed in the dark and got into bed. The sheets, like a million tiny furry hands caressed him, stroked him, soothing his body, lulling him gently towards sleep.

The voice came from beside him. "You smell of beer."

"I just had one with the boys."

"That's a lie. I 'visored the spaceport. They told me you came off at six. You've been drinking all this time."

"There was a gang in from Mars. I have to talk to them when they get in. It's the same every month."

"I don't believe you. You just use that as an excuse to go drinking."

He lay there with his eyes closed, not thinking about her at all. He felt a movement as she sat up in bed. He knew that she was looking at him in the darkness.

"You won't pull that one on me again, Mr. Larry Miller. *Oh, no!*" she said.

The sheets stroked him gently, persuasively, deftly, lovingly, bidding him sleep.

He slept.

It was four days afterwards that he thought of killing his wife. The night he went out to get drunk after hearing that the bill relaxing the law on married men taking spacemen's jobs had been thrown out.

The next morning he remembered very little about his orgy except the fact that he had been planning to murder his wife.

At the spaceport all that day he was picking up pencils, putting them down again, toying with india rubbers, paper clips, autowriters, thinking all the time: How could I have thought of such a thing? How *could* I? I may get fed up with Hilda but I don't want to kill her.

On the way home the thought of killing her was not so unpleasant. After all, he had often thought of how wonderful it would be to be rid of her eternal nagging. Supposing he admitted that he did, in fact, want to kill her, how would he go about it? What method would he adopt?

He was still brooding over it when he reached his house.

"You were in a disgusting state last night," she greeted him. "I wonder you had the nerve to come home at all."

"It's my house. I bought it, didn't I?"

"Don't you speak to me like that, Mr. Larry Miller."

Yes, he thought. Yes, I suppose I do want to kill her.

He planned it that night in his foam bath. He knew, even as he planned it, that he would be successful. It would not be easy, of course. No, there would be plenty of danger attached, plenty of it. But the more he thought about it the more certain he became that he would get away with it.

The following Saturday he took his wife, as always, into town in the beetlecar. In the largest and most expensive store she bought three new dresses and two hats and then they started back, taking the circular road home as they always did on Saturday mornings.

From quite a ways away Larry could see the traffic beams changing to "Go" on the main bridge over the river. The road was as clear and white as an opened roll of bandages. He drove along at moderate speed, waving to the policeman in the control box the way he always did.

The indicator changed to "Stop."

"Brakes!" shouted Larry Miller's wife.

Simulating agony in his voice Larry shouted: "My God! I can't!"

The car swerved, broke the railings and plunged fifty feet down into the river, striking the water even as Larry got his door open.

There was a commotion on the river bank, a shouting and a clanging of ambulance bells, the furious sound of police whistles scouring the cool, fine, morning air.

A police launch picked Larry up and men knelt on him, pumping water out of him. "My wife," he said, feebly. "My wife."

When they fished the car out they found that Hilda Miller was, understandably, dead.

Everyone was very sympathetic about it. Larry was taken to a hospital where he lay in white and antiseptic luxury while reporters, a policeman and an insurance agent spoke to him.

"It was the brakes all right," said the policeman. "Beats me how you ever got as far as you did without something happening!"

Larry smiled to himself, secretly. The job he'd had fixing those brakes!

On Sunday he went back home, walking, savoring the air.

The plaque had already been delivered when he reached the house. It sat in the mail box, glowing. He picked it up and looked at it, smiling a little. IN LOVING MEMORY OF HILDA, it said, phosphorescently. Below the words there was a three dimensional image of her let into the metal. On the tag he read: WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF FIRETRAPS, INC. How strange it must have been in the old days, he thought, when they buried their dead instead of putting them in the Firetraps. How strange to have put them under the earth instead

of burning them. How odd, too, to have made a ceremony of death, reading words over a body that was dead and was obviously not interested in anything any more.

Inside the house it was still. He walked through each room and slowly, slowly, with each step he took, the feeling of freedom deepened.

In the lounge he looked round and deliberately flicked ash on the carpet.

He walked to the wall cabinet and pressed two buttons. A shelf emerged bearing a large gin and a small bottle of tonic water. She used to say that she liked a drop of gin once in a while. But, of course, it wasn't good for *him*. He drained the glass, pressed the button for another and slumped into a chair to watch the teleshow, thinking again and again how good, how fine it was to be free.

That night he tore down the soundproof screens and opened one of the great crystal windows in his bedroom to let the sounds of the night come in. There were the rockets! The roaring whoosh as they took off, then the silver of fire burning upwards, upwards. And the stars far away, twinkling like demons' eyes in the cold black sea of space.

"At last I can go," he thought. "I can go on the rockets now. I'm not married any longer. I can get a spaceman's job and go off with Peters and Ericson and the others."

He sighed a deep, soft, contented sigh, as he stared out.

The roar of a rocket filled the room.

You have to have tough nerves and tough lungs to get a job on the rockets. He had neither, they told him at the medical. Oh, they were all so sorry about it. They knew that he had always yearned to be a spaceman. They knew, too, that he was tired of his desk job.

"But there it is, old man. I'm not saying you're ill, mind you. Far from it. It's just that you're not fit enough for space. You'd crack up within a month."

There were a lot of helpful smiles and pats on the back. A lot of kind and helpful men saying kind and helpful things to him. The manager of his office took him aside and told him that while they appreciated his eagerness to go out into space they considered that he was worth more to them all there in his office.

He spent the evening at the Rameses, talking to the barman.

"So they turned you down, eh?"

"Yes, they turned me down," said Larry, taking a deep pull on his cigarette.

"Too bad."

"They said I wouldn't be tough enough for space."

"They certainly need tough men all right."

"Said my lungs weren't tough enough; my nerves, too."

"My!"

"Told me I was more use on the ground staff."

"Maybe they're right."

"Huh?"

"Well, you can't tell."

"No, you can't ever tell, can you?" said Larry, slowly.

"By the way," said the barman, polishing a glass, "I heard about your wife today. Chap in the checking office told me about it all. Too bad."

"Yes," said Larry tiredly. "Too bad."

Overhead a rocket roared. Larry held his cigarette at arms length and gently patted it so that the ashes would fall unerringly into the receptacle below.

[The end of *Groundling* by Bryan Berry]