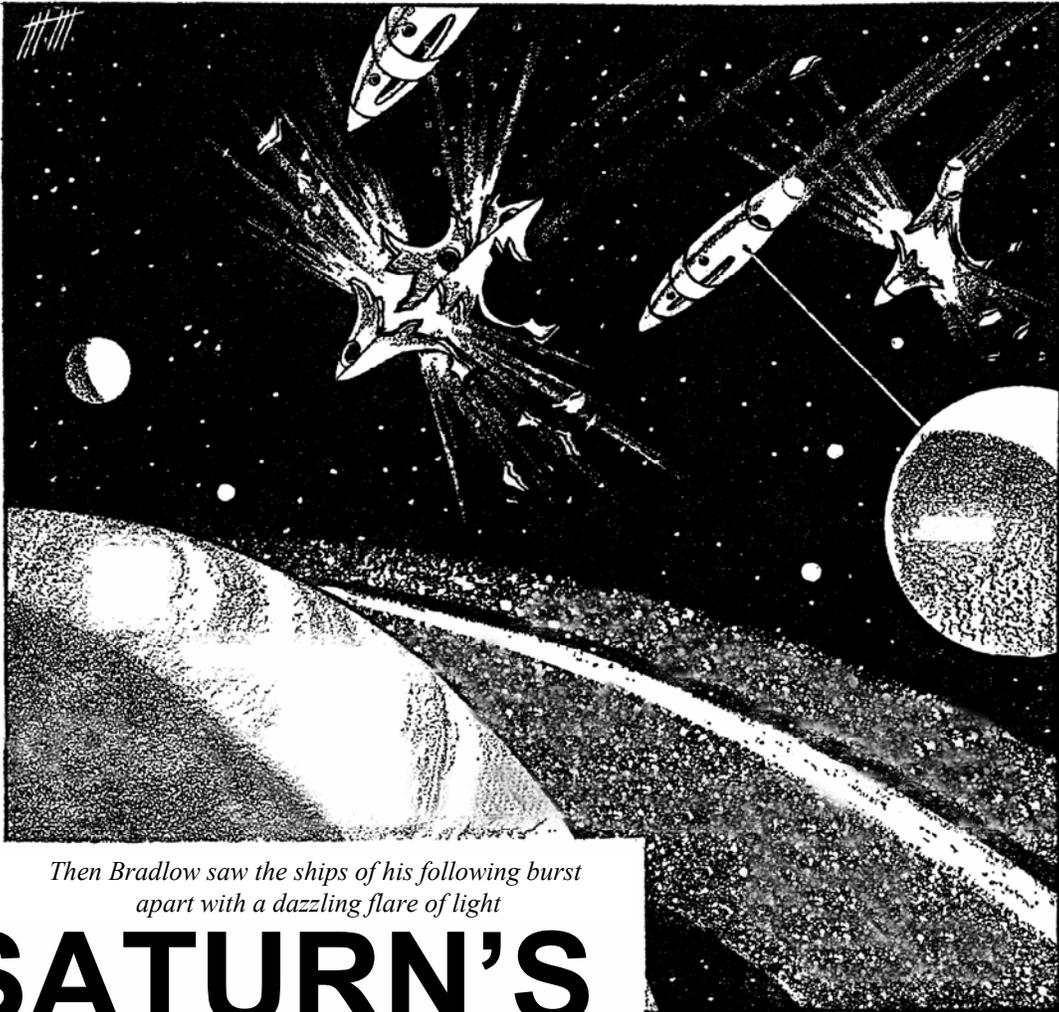


Helplessly Marooned in Space, Earthman and Uranian  
Devise a Cunning Trap for an Interplanetary Outlaw!



*Then Bradlow saw the ships of his following burst  
apart with a dazzling flare of light*

# SATURN'S RINGMASTER

By **RAYMOND Z. GALLUN**

*Author of "Old Faithful," "Derelict," etc.*

“**Y**OU'RE licked, Raff Orethon. The new Esar repulsion shield will protect me and my people, not the Titanian colony. I could kill you now, but to do so would be a waste of effort, since you are already as good as dead. Sometimes self-murder is

justified, my friend. If you and that ridiculous Uranian mascot of yours resorted to suicide, I am certain that you would save yourselves much anguish of mind. That is all. Korse Bradlow, the Ringmaster, has other business. Goodbye, trouble shooter! Farewell!”

Raff Orethon, strapped in the wrecked cabin of his spaceboat, was dimly aware of the words that clicked faintly in the etherphones of his oxygen helmet. His faculties were still numb from the crash. In them there was room for scarcely more than one thought—he had failed.

Foggily he saw Korse Bradlow creep over the rusty surface of the meteor against which the ruined spaceboat was telescoped. He saw him straighten up, holding the metal box which contained the pilfered Esar models tightly against the side of his vacuum armor. He saw Bradlow jump athletically clear of the great lump of cosmic refuse, catch the door-rail of his own gaudily gilded ship floating free in the ether, open the valve, and disappear into the interior.

A moment later the rockets of the golden craft spat blasts of incandescent flame, and it hurtled away, clear of the immeasurably frosty glory of Saturn's Rings. Its form dwindled swiftly among the brittle stars.

"What are we going to do now, Orethon?"

**T**HE question, sounding now in Raff's etherphones, was certainly human enough as far as its arrangement and meaning went; but the curious tinny rasp of it suggested the tones of some cheap and ancient phonograph. And to an uninformed observer its point of origin might have been puzzling at first. It came from the tympanic voice-membrane of Ruzza of Uranus.

Raff did not answer at once. He was trying to straighten things out—trying to remember just what had happened.

The Esar models had been intended for delivery to the colony on the Saturnian moon, Titan; and he had set out from Mars to take them there. But somehow, probably through the agency of his efficient spy system, Korse Bradlow, greatest rogue within the orbit of Pluto, had learned of the mission and had foreseen its purpose. It was a gesture of the forces of law against his piratical depredations.

When a full-sized Esar apparatus had been constructed, its deadly energy shield would screen the domes of the colony, rendering them forever impervious to attack. But meanwhile police craft could continue their assaults on Bradlow's camp on Tethys without fear of reprisal.

It was a dangerous situation for him who,

gifted with some touch of poetic humor, had called himself the Ringmaster. And he had acted promptly. Approaching from the rear, he had disabled Raff's flier with a protonic blast, and had caused it to dive into the Rings, where it had been smashed against a meteor. The fact that Orethon had survived the collision, was one of those strange tricks of relativity.

The meteor, hurtling around Saturn at a velocity of many miles per second, had been going just a shade slower than the uncontrolled ship, and in the same direction. And so Raff and his weird companion still lived. And because they were harmless and half stunned and the death by suffocation which was in store for them appealed to his sadistic nature, Bradlow had let them live.

But he had taken the Esar models from them.

Young Orethon could grasp all the details of the situation now.

Dazedly he looked down at the large fibrotex pocket on the front of his space suit. It bulged with abhorrent contents.

"What are we going to do, Ruzza?" he questioned irritably. "Nothing but admire the scenery, I guess—until our oxygen gives out."

Ruzza was a native of the buried caves of Uranus. It was his bulk, which would have weighed a scant three pounds on Earth, that caused Raff's pocket to bulge. Ruzza was a grotesquely humorous demonstration of the fact that all intelligent forms of life need not be wrought in human shape. His body was a ball of leathery brown flesh, pronged with sensitive prehensile feelers. Four of them, longer and thicker than the others, and covered by protecting sheaths of transparent, cellophane-like material, were thrust ludicrously out of the top of the pocket. They wavered from side to side with a restless motion.

At their tips, looking through the clear texture of his odd space attire, were bright, beady, intelligent eyes. Ruzza was a scientist of note in his own country. His association with Orethon—a matter now of seven Earth months—was an expression of an adventurous yearning in the unnamed soul of the tiny creature. He had paid in bars of priceless actinium for the privilege of traveling around with Orethon on his police duties; and though the young Earthman had often found Ruzza's constant presence annoying, he had

endured it because of the pay. Any enterprising youth would have done so.

The Uranian gave his buzzing version of a human laugh. "At least the scenery is very nice, eh, friend?" he questioned.

**O**RETHON agreed with a sullen nod. It was Ruzza's endless effort to be friendly that irritated him most. But he could not disagree with the little fellow now.

The spectacle around them was the most grandly beautiful in the solar system, and perhaps in the entire universe. The large meteor on which they were marooned was one of myriads that were in sight. Their range in size was tremendous; some were as massive as small mountains, while an immeasurable host of others were as fine as grains of dust. Glowing silvery with the reflected rays of the distant sun, they formed a tremendous arching pathway, the width of several Earths.

Close at hand, the path was murky, like a haze; but distance sharpened its outlines until it became a great ribbon curving around the cloud-wrapped bulk of Saturn. Each cosmic lump and particle that composed it was a minute moon of the monster planet.

Beyond the filmy texture of the Rings, the greater satellites glowed sullenly—Mimas, Rhea, Titan, Tethys—Tethys, home of Bradlow's band. Beyond the moon were the stars, eerily bright against the frigid blackness of infinity.

Under other circumstances Raff Orethon might have found the view even more interesting. But now the harsh grandeur of it only served to emphasize the helplessness of his position. His spaceboat was wrecked beyond any possibility of repair; a glance through the shattered observation window at its crumpled prow, gleaming in the contrasting lights of many spheres, was enough to tell him that.

And it was not only his life and the Uranian's that would be lost; many Titan colonists would perish, and many others would be reduced to a state of slavery. Korse Bradlow would have his way now.

"What will the Ringmaster do, now that he has the repulsion shield?" Ruzza demanded suddenly.

Raff shrugged, annoyed by what seemed to him a childish question.

"You heard his little speech of departure," he said. "Isn't that enough? Among the renegade Terrestrials and Martians in his outfit, there are plenty of skilled mechanics. He'll build a big Esar apparatus to protect his headquarters on Tethys, of course. And he can make another apparatus to screen his fleet. From behind the screen he can blast our orderly colony on Titan out of existence if it doesn't submit. But it will—eventually. He'll rule the whole system of Saturn! So far from their home bases, no Earthly or Martian fleet would dare oppose him. And his depredations against commerce will doubtless continue."

"Zaah, Raff Orethon!" Ruzza buzzed. "It must not happen!"

The Earthman felt exasperation rising within him.

"I'm with you that way, Ruzza," he said. "It must not happen. But I'm afraid it will in spite of anything we can do to prevent it. We're stranded here until doomsday. We can't even save our own necks. Our etherphones, even at maximum power, couldn't send a warning all the way to Titan, even if such a warning would do any good. Our ship can't be repaired, and if it could be, we'd still find it impossible to get far. This is Bradlow's territory; his patrols are never far out of sight. A damaged flier could never escape."

"Supposing some small trick of invisibility were used?" Ruzza queried.

"It would be nice," Raff replied with bitter sarcasm. "It would be easy for us to go right to work and invent an invisibility machine—something which has never been effectively accomplished on any of the known planets."

Ruzza's prongs bristled within the pocket that held him.

"You do not understand what I mean, Raff Orethon!" he shrilled. "It is simpler than that! Wait! Put me down!"

Obediently the Earthman hoisted Ruzza from his odd refuge, and lowered him to the floor of the cabin. The Uranian, clad in his transparent space garment, drew himself with his feelers through the opening left when the craft's door had bulged from its hinges. Raff looked into the periscope to watch him in his swift scrambling progress astern. Presently Ruzza disappeared into a rent in the crumpled jumble of the spaceboat's tail assembly.

THERE was a long silence, during which Orethon remained in the cabin, tentatively fussing with the machine-gun with which the craft was equipped. The weapon's long barrel was badly twisted at the muzzle. But it would be possible to saw off the ruined part, thus making the gun practically as good as new. The complicated sighting mechanism seemed undamaged. But at these thoughts Raff's lips curled cynically. What was the use? He and Ruzza were hopelessly trapped and impotent.

Then the Uranian's voice buzzed and shrilled again in Orethon's helmet phones: "One rocket tube is intact, and another is not beyond repair," Ruzza announced.

"So?" Raff questioned. "What about it? All the new rockets on Earth and Mars wouldn't put this pile of junk into flying trim again!"

"Wait, Raff Orethon," Ruzza answered. "I have the beginning of a plan. I will explain. But we must be careful. The power of our etherphones must be cut down to minimum so that no one will hear."

Raff was mildly curious.

"Mine's at minimum, of course," he said. "Shoot!"

He listened while the Uranian outlined his sketchily conceived scheme in low, buzzing tones. His hard young face, illumined by the contrasting lights of Saturn's system, underwent many swift changes. First it showed the chagrin of doubt, then dawning wonder, then hope. Finally all his natural enthusiasm and resourcefulness, which had seemed to be drained out of him, returned.

Once more he was his old, energetic, forceful self.

"It's worth a try, Ruzza," he said grimly. "Maybe it won't work, but we can't help that."

For a minute he sat chewing his lip and tried to clear up in his mind the hazier phases of the plan.

"We'll have to get rid of what's left of the ship," he mused. "But that should be easy. All we have to do is shove it off into space. And we'll have to plot our course carefully, because we won't have the use of the usual well-balanced guiding machinery. There'll be the danger of colliding with meteors, of course; but that's a risk we'll have to take. Some of Bradlow's men will get us in the end. Or—or maybe—not—"

Raff's brows knitted as he sought to concentrate. His gaze fell on the tiny atomic projectiles in the belts of the machine-gun. Each projectile was filled with an explosive of tremendous violence; and each was fitted with a time fuse that could delay explosion a full minute from the instant of percussion.

Suddenly he was very grateful for the possibilities of those fuses. The delay they offered might spell the difference between life and death for his small, startling companion, and for himself.

"Come on, Ruzza!" he said at last. "We've got a lot to do, but it won't take long if we will only hurry!"

He unstrapped himself and kicked the ruined door of the flier out of his way. He had tools in his kit—blast-welders, chisels, wrenches. Gingerly he clambered forth onto the pitted surface of the meteor. Its gravity was almost nothing, and a too abrupt movement might have set him adrift in spite of his magnetized boots which attracted the nickel-iron alloy under him.

Like a tumbleweed Ruzza bowled toward him to help. Saturn and its moons looked on, as if fascinated by the strange machinations of living creatures.

**S**KILFULLY Korse Bradlow guided his gilded space flier toward Tethys. A cruel smirk of triumph curved his thin lips. He was pleased, and he was off guard. He was within his own section of space. There was but one danger that he knew about, and it was not a great one. Meteors were plentiful here, so close to Saturn's Rings. Because of them, and because there was no reason to hurry, he pursued his course at leisure.

His thoughts were pleasant. The exquisite bit of piracy he had just accomplished would be accepted by the horde he commanded as sure evidence of his right to rule. That was why he had undertaken the theft of the Esar models single-handed. His following, gleaned from the criminal ranks of a solar system, was a fickle crowd at best. To remain its leader, a man must constantly demonstrate his prowess.

And Korse Bradlow knew that he was the only man fit to command. He had made Bradlow's Circus; he had made himself its Ringmaster. Without him, petty and bloody

differences would soon cause it to break up, its various factions falling easy prey to the police patrols.

But his position was doubly assured now. In his mind's eye he could picture pleasant things that soon would happen. He could see ships, protected by the blue fire of the repulsion shield, hurtling down upon Titan, smashing the domes of its Colony and whipping its people into submission. Titan would yield before other Esar models could be sent to the harassed inhabitants. Korse Bradlow was happy, steeped in his rambling dreams—dreams which seemed as certain to be realized as tomorrow's dawn and dusk, on Earth.

He did not glance into his rear-vision periscope. But had he done so at the proper moment, he might have seen a slender sword of incandescent flame limned against Saturn's tremendous bulk.

It might have been the fiery wake of any ordinary spacecraft, building up speed. The rockets of vessels that navigate the ether are not continuously active during flight. They flame only when a change in velocity or direction is necessary; otherwise, in the frictionless void, no application of power is required. A ship can coast on at undiminished speed for an indefinite if not infinite distance.

Presently the nearing trail of incandescence died out. Bradlow had not seen it; and if he had, he would have thought only that one of his henchmen was on a scouting tour somewhere astern.

And then a little red light gleamed on his instrument panel. Someone was calling him by etherphone.

Switches moved in his grasp.

"The Ringmaster speaking," he drawled into the microphone inside his oxygen helmet. His voice was lazy and bored.

"You were a fool to let Ruzza and me live, Bradlow," came the words.

Though the Ringmaster recognized the speaker at once, he was not alarmed.

"So, Orethon?" he questioned.

"Yes, Bradlow," was the calm reply. "We have tricks up our sleeves other than the Esar shield. You did not know that we were carrying another invention to Titan—one which will render

a space ship invisible, It is in operation now, my friend. You will notice, too, if you take observations with your direction finder, that the waves which bring this message to you come from a point of origin which you will consider impossible. We have changed position, Bradlow. We are no longer in the Rings. We are clear of them, and we are coming toward you with intent to kill. How it is that we have moved, I leave you to guess."

The Ringmaster's laugh was low and scornful.

"I admire your nerve, Orethon," he said. "Probably I'd try a bluff, too, if I were one of the living dead, as you are."

NEVERTHELESS Bradlow turned his attention to a rectangular coil of wire, mounted on a universal joint. He pointed its axis in the direction of the place where Orethon and Ruzza should be, allowing for the steady rotation of the substance of the Rings. Then he watched the bobbing needle of a sensitive galvanometer. Its reading did not balance as it should with the strength of the incoming carrier waves, which, though Orethon was not speaking at the moment, were still being broadcast. Bradlow moved the coil experimentally, seeking the point of balance. And at last he found it, high up, clear of the Rings as Orethon had said!

A frown of worried puzzlement creased the Ringmaster's brow. What the young patrol pilot had said was obviously true in part at least. But that all of it could be true was of course impossible. And yet, who could be sure? For a moment Korse Bradlow felt a twinge of dread. Then, before him, against the star curtain of space, he saw the slender forms of seven fliers. Some of his followers were coming to meet him. Their presence served to banish the faint uncertainty which had touched his iron nerves.

Orethon's voice was speaking again in his helmet phones. "I believe that by now you have found that what I have told you is not entirely a bluff, Bradlow," it stated coolly. "I seem pretty sure of myself, don't I? Probably you've got a young space navy within call. You'd better yell for help, Bradlow."

The Ringmaster betrayed none of the fury the insult aroused in him.

"You want a show, do you, Orethon?" he questioned mildly. "Well, it'll be just a workout for the boys. Your wish shall be granted, trouble shooter!"

He changed the adjustment of his etherphone, and gave a sharp whistle into the mike. This was his signal for attention. A moment later he heard words of enthusiastic response coming from his henchmen:

"Arka reporting, Sire... Ledrak reporting... Leilson reporting..."

Loyal Earthmen and Martians were answering the call of the Ringmaster.

"Fan formation!" Bradlow ordered sharply. "Watch for damaged flier of XL type. Blast out of existence at sight!"

He followed the command with a string of numbers which, in the terms of space navigation, indicated the position of Raff Orethon and Ruzza as nearly as he had been able to determine it with the direction finder.

The golden ship of the Ringmaster executed a quick hairpin turn, its rockets flaming. The seven other fliers followed like an angry horde. Sharp eyes were directed keenly ahead.

Minutes passed. The damaged craft bearing Orethon and Ruzza should be in sight now, but it was not. There was nothing near except a few drifting meteors, shadow-blotched in the contrasting lights of the sun and of Saturn and her moons and Rings. And meteors were too common here to attract more than momentary attention.

Bradlow was becoming nervous. Could there be any truth in what the insolent patrol pilot had said about an invisibility apparatus? He had scarcely given any credence to that part of what Orethon had said before; but now he did not quite know what to believe.

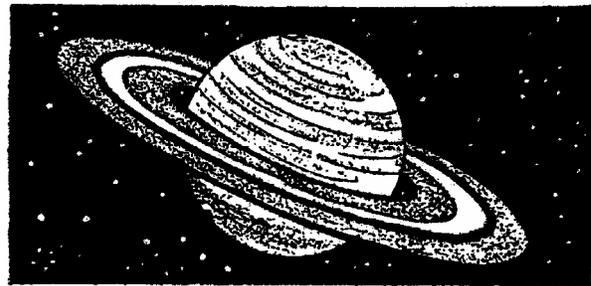
**H**E heard nothing as tiny explosive projectiles drilled through the outer shell of his golden flier, for the vacuum compartments between its inner and external walls deadened all sounds which might have come from such a source.

Some moments went by as the time fuses of the projectiles burned. Then Bradlow saw one of the ships of his following burst apart with a dazzling flare of light. For an instant he felt a panic such as he had never before experienced. The atomic explosion which ripped his own craft

asunder was too sudden and violent for disintegrating human senses to record.

By then the meteors had passed far astern. One of them was not quite what it seemed. Its Saturnward end had been hollowed out, so that a tiny cave was formed there. At the mouth of the cave a pair of rocket tubes had been welded firmly to the meteoric alloy, their muzzles carefully countersunk to minimize the possibility of their being seen. Through the opening above the tubes, the shortened barrel of a machine-gun projected.

Behind the weapon crouched a man, and beside him in the tiny cave they had carved out with blast-welders, was the grotesque shape of a Uranian.



Looking back through the mouth of their refuge, they saw several swift flashes of flame.

"Five, Raff Orethon!" Ruzza shrieked. "Four and the Ringmaster! We made sure of him and his gilded ship. He is dead, and the Esar models are destroyed. Bradlow's Circus will break up now, without his leadership. Titan won't even need the repulsion shield! Nice stunt—my 'invisibility' trick—wasn't it? Our rocket tubes practically turned this old meteor into a spaceship. And if you hadn't thought of using those time fuses on the atomic projectiles our friends probably would have spotted us and have burned us out of space. The first exploding ship would have put them wise. But we had those five as good as smashed before their pilots knew it. And the three that remain will never find us. The men at the controls will never guess the truth, simple as it is."

In response to this long speech, Raff only nodded laconically; but when he looked at the tiny Uranian, pronged and brown like an oversized burdock bur of his own native countryside, and yet, by some surprising whim of nature, humanly intelligent, there was in his eyes a new awe and respect for his weird companion. All his petty resentments were gone; and in their place was a feeling of real friendship at last.

**R**AFF glanced at his wrist watch, strapped over the fabric of his space suit.

“Continuing on our present course, we’ll be within hailing distance of Titan with our etherphones within ten hours,” he said. “We have enough oxygen to last until they send somebody out to pick us up. Meanwhile, what’ll we do?”

“Talk about Earth, sing about Earth, and maybe sleep and dream about Earth,” Ruzza replied. “We’ll be going there soon, I think. The Commissioners will give you a leave with pay, I’m sure, for this Bradlow business. I’ll be glad,

because I always wanted to collect terrestrial butterflies; and you’ll be glad because you’ll see Miss Emily; and she’ll be glad because she’ll see you. Even all around, eh?”

Raff grinned genially behind the curve of his transparent oxygen helmet, and began to hum the tune of some ludicrous song. Ruzza joined him with rasping buzzes.

But beyond the maw of their meteor cave, the mad glory of Saturn’s system was still visible, hemmed in by the black void and the sardonic stars.