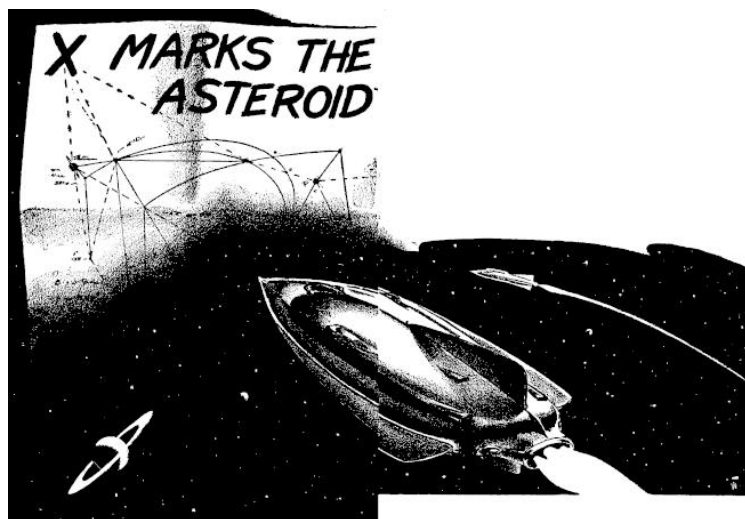


X MARKS THE ASTEROID

By Ross Rocklynne



Deep in space Ralph's ancestors lay in suspended animation—a price on their heads. They left him a map and a problem: awaken them—or collect the reward!...

X MARKS THE ASTEROID

The Unterzuyder map was out of hiding. Relayed on a grapevine that spanned the planets, the news caught on big in Marsport.

Bigger Bailes sat at a beer-bottle-colored glass desk in his underworld retreat, announcing his intent to claim the reward money that for eighty-five years had been piling up at compound interest in the Terra-First National Bank of New York.

"Ralph Unterzuyder is here in Marsport," he stated. "Like all Unterzuyders, he's clever and he's dangerous and he's shifty. He'll travel the crookedest course you ever saw. At the moment, he's got his identity pretty well covered up under the name of Carruthers Straley. In the last three weeks he's organized a band of settlers from Satterfield City who call themselves Titan Settlers, Ltd.

"Not that I'm fooled! I'm not saying the Unterzuyder hibernaculum is on Titan. I'm not even saying Unterzuyder has the map. But I'm willing to bet he's got a pretty good idea where the map is. I'm also willing to bet that his father died without leaving him a cent, and that he organized Titan Settlers, Ltd., just to get himself a free ride out Saturn-way. He's capable of that kind of reasoning."

Bigger Bailes smiled rosily and reached for his hat. One of his men held the door open for him.

"Right now, I'm on my way to see Carruthers Straley. Maybe he will cut in with me. If not—" he thoughtfully rubbed at the fat of his big jaw "—if not, I'll help him hang himself."

Ralph Unterzuyder, fourth generation descendant of the infamous Unterzuyders, emerged testily from the Glass & Sand Bldg. where he had just set up a law office under the name of Carruthers Straley. No sooner had he set foot to the glass sidewalk than he was aware a big, smiling man had fallen into step beside him. He backed up against the wall of the building, his eyes wide and cautious behind dark glasses.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

Bigger Bailes smiled, introduced himself. Unterzuyder looked around as if ready to make a break for it. Bailes stood in front of him. He shook his head.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Mr. Unterzuyder."

At mention of the name, Unterzuyder smiled arrogantly.

"Really, does one have no privacy? But perhaps one of your caliber is well acquainted with the advantages of using an alias!"

"There are advantages," Bigger nodded. "Your advantage lies in heading a group of settlers who don't know you're using them to help you find the asteroid where your ancestors have been sleeping for the past eighty-odd years."

Unterzuyder's cane whipped around nervously. "I know nothing about a map!"

Bigger's jowls quivered with mirth. "Seven weeks ago," he pointed out, "your father died. He told you the map was hidden in an old book called *Tertium Organum*, A Key To The Enigmas Of The World. By somebody named Ouspensky."

Unterzuyder's eyes moved desperately to the street, down which a single gyromobile moved.

"I have an appointment," he said stiffly. "Now if you will permit me to be on my way before they turn the rain-makers on—"

"It won't rain for ten minutes. Better let me finish—if you don't want your precious settlers to know who you really are!

"As soon as your aunt heard about your father's death, she put the old Unterzuyder house up for auction to pay your father's creditors. The furniture went mostly to junk-dealers, the rest to museums. All the books, some ten thousand of them, were bought by a big New York used-book company, Frangy & Sons, Ltd.

"Half of these books, the ones whose titles all began with the letters of the alphabet up through 'M', were kept in their New York branch. The remainder were sent to open a book store in Marsport. By the time you got to Marsport from Earth, the book was reported already sold—to a person unknown. That's all true, *isn't* it?

"After having failed to find the map, Mr. Unterzuyder, you then sent the story to a newspaper—anonynously."

"I did?" Unterzuyder looked arrogantly at Bailes.

"Yes." Bigger's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Unterzuyder surged angrily away from the wall. "I am not interested in your questions. I have my chosen mission in life. It is not the making of money!"

He brandished his cane. "I warn you, Mr. Bailes," he cried, "I am a nervous man. If I am not permitted to leave—"

Bigger spread his hands, astonished. "Don't think for a minute I'm keeping you. The only suggestion I wanted to make was that you and I could work together."

Untertzuyder took off his glasses. There were red marks around his eyes where the glasses had taken hold. He had inherited the famous thin nose and receding chin of the Untertzuyders. His pale thin lips worked nervously.

"I work alone, Mr. Bailes," he said haughtily. "And I work best when such as you try to set your pitiful little traps! Threaten me as you will, nothing can keep me from my purpose. And now good-day."

Bigger's voice was filled with disgust. "Your purpose being, of course, to find asteroid X and free your ancestors so they can go to work on the Solar System again!"

Untertzuyder glared, primly returned his glasses to his nose, and stalked off.

"Scoundrel!" he muttered, putting his hand over his heart. He gasped. It was racing. And he was sweating. Trembling. His mother, the Untertzuyder matriarch, had been quite right. He should take care of his health.

By the time he caught a one-wheeled gyromobile that came bowling down the glass street, he was feeling much better.

"Take me to the Hotel de Mars," he told the driver. He leaned back comfortably, gloved hands resting on the head of his cane while he looked around him. A strange, glass-domed city, set in the heart of Mars' desert wastelands. A thriving city, with low buildings touching the glass roof of the dome.

The rain-maker went on, the first drops splattering down from the overhead sprinkler system. Unterzuyder cringed.

"Driver, driver!" he cried, rapping smartly with his cane. "Do you want me to catch my death?"

The driver hurriedly caused the separate halves of the glassteel cupola to fold over the car. Unterzuyder settled back injuredly.

At the registration desk of the Hotel de Mars, he asked for, and was shown to the room of, Mr. Nathaniel and Miss Fayette Beecher. The door was thrown open by a tanned blonde girl in smart gray jodhpurs and slick boots.

Her face at first registered a nervousness. Then it smoothed.

"Oh!" she sang out, blue eyes widening and taking him in from head to toe. "You must be Mr. Straley." She cocked her lively face cutely to one side. "*Are* you?"

Unterzuyder's heart banged. He bit his lip. This was exactly the kind of girl his dead mother warned him to stay away from. Coquettish. Sexy. Treacherous, like most females. And he had lately noticed, to his dismay, that he, an Unterzuyder, was becoming far too susceptible to such unhealthy influences.

"I am Mr. Straley," he said coldly. "Carruthers Straley, founder of Titan Settlers, Ltd. Shall I come in?"

"Please *do*. For a moment, I lost my wits."

She's making a play for me, like all females, he thought. Discouragedly, Unterzuyder went in. He sat down on a sponge-plastic chair, resting his gloved hands on his cane and looking upon the girl sternly.

"Daddy!" she sang out. "Mr. Straley is here!"

A man with a half-bald head and a deep tan lunged into the room carrying a heavy rocket-gun. His grin was wide, his voice reedy and enthusiastic. He was happy to know Mr. Straley. He laid the gun tenderly on the floor. Unterzuyder looked at it distrustfully.

Beecher's reedy laugh sounded. "It's not cocked," he explained. "You caught me right in the middle of a clean-and-polish job. That ol' gun o' mine's been everywhere, mister. Most of the Moons of Jupiter, out on the deserts—even Africa. Yessir, our exploring expeditions have taken us into every corner of the Solar System that's available."

The girl whipped open a drawer in the bottom of a boxy chair made of crystal glassteel. "And here's *my* pet!" She reached in to pull out a long-snouted neutron gun with a triple trigger. Unterzuyder's heart banged for the third time in an hour. In the drawer was one other object: *Tertium Organum*, A Key To The Enigmas Of The World.

An old book. A musty book. The book from his beloved dead father's library. The book that held the Unterzuyder map.

His breath hissed. Beecher leaned solicitously forward. "Anything wrong, Mr. Straley?"

"Oh, no, nothing," said Unterzuyder, pain wrenching his face. "But I'm not a healthy man. My heart—"

"Oh, what a shame." Fayette leaned over him, dizzying him with her perfume. She put her warm little hand on his forehead. She held his wrist to feel his pulse. She shook her blonde curls vigorously. "Nope. No fever. The pulse *did* seem to race a little

when I held your hand. Outside of that—" She surveyed him judiciously. "I'll bet you're as healthy as a Venusian peat-dog!"

"Oh, come now," protested Beecher. "If the man says he's got a galloping heart, that's what he's got. Think of the courage, the idealism, the sheer fortitude of this man, who has gathered together a group of settlers to brave the dangers of a jungle-world like Titan—a planet no one has ever attempted to colonize! I personally *hand* it to the man!"

There was a fawning admiration on his unshaven, grinning face.

Unterzuyder settled back in his chair, feeling put upon.

"I'm afraid of guns," he told Fayette petulantly. "If you'd please put it away—Besides—" He drew a clipping from his bill-fold. "—I am already convinced of your prowess as explorers."

The headlines on the clipping read:

EXPLORERS RETURN FROM
GANYMEDE ICE TUNDRA

Father and daughter
make unique team

"It says quite a bit about the expeditions you two have headed. Needless to say, I'm impressed! I am here, of course, to make you a proposition."

He explained his purpose at some length. For several weeks he had been engaged on a project dear to his heart. He believed in the future of the human race. He wanted to spread mankind's dominion even beyond the Moons of Jupiter. Titan had been viewed by only

two men, both of whom stated it was livable. It had soil. It had vegetation. Also, it had dangerous animal life.

"That's for us!" said Fayette stoutly. She accidentally pointed the neutron gun at Unterzuyder. She was squirming around on her chair with repressed vitality. Her eyes melted on him. He wished he could get over the feeling that she was laying it on too thick. That perfume. He must not allow himself to be affected.

He cringed from the gun. She hastily put it on the floor. He wondered how accidental it might have been. Probably these cheap opportunists were perfectly capable of killing.

He would have to watch his step. They had the map, all right. The bookseller's description of Fayette had been quite correct and helpful.

Fortunately, the bookseller had been willing to accept a bribe not to give anybody else the information.

He spoke again.

"When I received your viso-call, Miss Beecher, I at once felt that Titan Settlers could work with you. I seriously discussed with them the possibility of giving you and your father titular command of the expedition."

"Uh—" said Fayette. "You've already been capitalized?"

Unterzuyder coughed delicately. "My intrepid settlers are composed of young husbands and wives and their children. I was able to sell them—that is—the magic allure of a new world was really all that was necessary to convince them that Titan is where

their destiny lay. They sold all their belongings, and—ah—invested the funds with me as Treasurer of the organization."

Beecher smacked his hands together enthusiastically.

"Fine, fine! There's nothing the daughter and I like better than to push on into a new frontier. Mr. Straley, for twenty thousand credits we're bought!"

Unterzuyder sat bolt upright. "Ten thousand credits," he said severely, "is the top amount we can offer. That is final. With one thousand credits in advance!"

He whipped out a check book. He adjusted his glasses. Primly, he wrote a check and extended it with a jabbing motion, holding it for perhaps thirty seconds before Beecher's crestfallen face turned toward his daughter. Fayette was looking with intense interest at the check.

"Why not? Mr. Straley, like you, we're idealists. Money means hardly anything. I think you've made a deal!"

Beecher stowed the check in his wallet with satisfaction. "Now we'll get busy. Of course, we'll have to have a drawing account. We'll have to discuss details, such as the number of settlers to be transported so I can buy or charter the proper type of space ship. There's the matter of building supplies to be bought—grain seeds—food—a thousand details which you can leave entirely in our hands, Mr. Straley!

"And while we're at it, I'd like to shake your hand! It's very few people who'd endanger their own lives to further the progress of mankind!"

The experience left Unterzuyder weak. He looked appealingly at Fayette. "I wonder if a glass of water—" he said feebly.

Hurriedly she disappeared to the apartment kitchen. Unterzuyder slumped lower in the seat, breathing hard.

"Maybe," he told Beecher helplessly, "a shot of whiskey would do the trick better."

"Sure thing!" Beecher went after his daughter. As soon as they were both out of the room, Unterzuyder got up and pulled open the drawer containing *Tertium Organum*, A Key To The Enigmas Of The World. Quickly he unfolded the chart in the back of the book. The map should be there.

It wasn't.

He slapped the drawer shut, sank feebly back to his seat. The Beechers were gone an inordinately long time. He thought he heard them whispering in the kitchen. Then Beecher lunged back into the room bearing a jigger of no doubt cheap rye. Unterzuyder gulped it down and put the glass to one side.

Fayette was admiring. "For a man in poor health," she exclaimed, "you take it without a whimper—or a chaser!"

"Eh?" Unterzuyder blinked, then drew himself up stiffly. "Whiskey is the only medicine my doctor permits. And now, let's get down to the matter of the contract!"

One month later.

Ralph Unterzuyder was furious. He stalked the darkened decks of the trembling space ship *Ares*—a slick hundred-tonner with sixty

square feet of firing surface—and reflected that the Beechers were making a worse sucker out of him than he'd expected them to.

First, they were a pair of fakers. That much had been obvious from the start, with that phony newspaper write-up, all that bragging about their knowledge of fire-arms when they didn't even know enough to keep a weapon pointed toward the floor. Well, he'd expected that much. But to discover they did not even have *basic* knowledge of how to outfit an expedition!

They had actually begun ordering *lumber* for building, until he pointed out the climate of Titan might be kinder to prefabricated glassteel sections.

They had actually paid out money for seeds, bulbs, and saplings until he showed that all farming on Titan must for the present be on an experimental or at best highly speculative basis.

Not only that, they had attempted to charter a ship twice as big as needed, one that used large quantities of chemical fuels. That ridiculous error had been amended with a smaller ship sporting atomic gas-thrust. As for the captain and crew, they had been hired by Unterzuyder himself—and, by means of the secret passage of one thousand credits from Titan Settlers' funds to Captain Foshag, the captain and crew were bought.

Unterzuyder balanced himself angrily down a companionway. As he passed a hanging ventilator, the drum-beat and skittering rhythm of a jury-rigged orchestra echoed up from the ballroom. A dance was in progress. Unterzuyder smiled sentimentally. Nothing like giving the settlers a run for their money.

Of course, he reflected dourly, Fayette Beecher had got the best of him in the matter of using the drawing account. Unterzuyder scowled. What had got into him? Somehow, Fayette's roving blue eyes and fiery touch did their work on him. Next thing he knew, he was in duress, being dragged on the arm of that fluffy creature from one dress shop to another.

An expense account to buy swirling party dresses?—with a smidgin here and there for fancy explorers' outfits? The memory of his folly made Unterzuyder squirm.

He sighed heavily as he came to C deck. Anyway, by his own cleverness, he had a ship, he had the Beechers—who had the map!

And the hibernaculum asteroid, where his dozen infamous ancestors were sleeping away the decades under the influence of a potent, forbidden drug called somnolene, was somewhere out near Titan. Or *had been*.

That was the one thing he remembered when, as a child, his father showed him the legendary map. At least he was headed for the area where the asteroid *might be*.

And so might, he reflected glumly, that arrogant, impossible Bigger Bailes!

The Beecher's double-state-room was on C deck. Just as he turned an L in the corridor, he ran head-on into a gaily running figure clad in a fluffy party dress.

For a moment they struggled in an attempt to regain their balance, and when Unterzuyder came out of it he was holding Fayette Beecher tightly, and he was kissing her warm little face. She

responded just as energetically. And suddenly he woke up to the horror of the role he had assumed.

He shoved her away. She stumbled backward and there was a glassy tinkling sound.

"Ooh, your glasses!" cried Fayette, making a grab for them. He grabbed, too, suddenly convinced he had gone blind. "They're broken, Ralph, honey!" she said. "You look so much better without them." She flung her arms around him again, pressing him back to the wall. Her lips drooped disappointedly.

"I—I'm fond of you," she said unhappily. "But you're so darned peculiar. You fell all over yourself kissing me. Now you're backing off. What's wrong?"

Unterzuyder was scared. It came as a shock to him that the extreme emergency of the situation had given him, by some hypnotic process, better vision than he'd ever had. In spite of the darkness of the hall, he could see that Fayette was ravishing. She could make a strong man weak. Well, he would not give her that opportunity.

Besides, something she'd said just now, something he couldn't put his finger on, had subconsciously frightened him. What?

These treacherous Beechers!

Maybe she was using her indomitable weapon to win him over. To what?

Perhaps to cut him in on the map. X marks the spot, indeed! X was a moving asteroid. It had been moving for some eighty-odd years since the map was made. To find its present location was a problem in celestial mechanics. The map would have to be

deciphered. Not only that, the original maker of the map, being an Unterzuyder, had undoubtedly confused the issue by making the job hard even for a mathematician.

Naturally, the Beechers hadn't dared take the map to anybody for deciphering. To do so, might have brought the whole criminal element in the Solar System after them. That of course, was a little thing Unterzuyder himself had arranged—when he anonymously gave the details of the story to the press.

The Beechers had been boxed in.

Now, in desperation, the Beechers probably figured that if Fayette could make Carruthers Straley fall in love with her, that he, being a lawyer, might have a devious enough mind to think like an Unterzuyder and decipher the map! *And* not betray them.

They did not understand that Ralph Unterzuyder, alias Carruthers Straley, worked alone.

They would find it out. And so would Bigger Bailes.

He answered her direct question stiffly. "I shall continue to back off, Fayette. Love is an emotion which can be defined in various unflattering terms. I would not care to tumble your romantic castles! My mother—"

"Aha! Your mother!" She leaped upon the word with a knowing and very wide grin. Then she took advantage of his pinned position against the bulkhead to kiss him again, determinedly and hard. For a wild half of eternity, his senses were swept away on a skittering whirlwind. Then by main force he tore away and lunged down the corridor.

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