

# SCIENCE FICTION

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**MARCH**  
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A GREAT NEW NOVEL

PAUL

# Star of Blue

By MILTON KALETSKY

“**A**ND so, my dear marshal, you have no choice but to surrender unconditionally.”

Generalissimo Ankeen, commander-in-chief of the battle forces of Mars, paused to note the effect of this declaration on his prisoner of war, Marshal Hughes, leader of Earth's fighting men.

The Earthman's look of cold contempt did not change. Over his pale, lined features, his bushy gray eyebrows rose a little as he returned the Martian's stare. But he said nothing.

Ankeen scowled. “I repeat, Hughes, in the eight days since we captured you, your battle fleets have been largely ruined. Oh, your men fought bravely and did us a lot of damage, I admit, but without you to lead them—” the Martian bowed derisively—“my forces smashed your chief fleets, and now Earth lies helpless before me!”

A triumphant leer passed across the Martian's green face. Marshal Hughes' impassive features showed no change, and still he said nothing.

Ankeen looked annoyed.

“This bravado of yours will do you no good,” he told Hughes in his thin, piping voice, “just as the courage of Earth's defenders will do them no good either. If you do not order them to surrender, they will go on fighting and I'll be compelled to destroy them utterly. It means the death of millions and the responsibility for this bloodshed will lie directly on you.”

Marshal Hughes smiled thinly.

“Typical Martian logic,” he remarked quietly. “You'll murder millions of Earthmen who want only peace and then *you'll* blame *me* for it.”

Generalissimo Ankeen glared at Hughes. “This is war! Nothing can stop Mars from conquering the entire solar system, and I'm going to do it!”

His voice rose fanatically, then it dropped suddenly and took on an almost pleading note.

“Hughes, you're absolute dictator of Earth during this war and your people will obey you. Save them from destruction! Order them to surrender!”

The Earthman answered with quiet pride. “Yes, they will obey me. And I have given them only one order: ‘Fight on!’”

Ankeen sneered a sarcastic reply. “Very, very dramatic, my dear marshal, but very very foolish. The day of such heroism on the part of generals is long over. No longer do leaders of armies and fleets fight with their men as you do. That's why you were captured, Hughes, while I sat safely on Mars.

“In fact,” Ankeen continued, “I have never been off this planet, yet every move my men make, every action they carry out, is planned and directed solely by me. Alone, I am the guiding mind of Mars!”

He paused, enjoying the sound of his own voice boasting of his power.

“Right from this room here on Mars I directed the conquest of Venus and

**Marshall Hughes, leader of Earth's fighting men, finds himself faced with surrender to the heartless ruler of Mars—until he looks into the heavens where the fate of his world rests upon the identification of a color—**

of Jupiter's moons. Earth is next!"

Hughes answered noncommittally, "Perhaps."

The Martian's face grew dark with anger. He leaned forward across the table between them to shake his three-fingered fist at Marshal Hughes.

"You doubt me? Then listen to this: At this very moment, my bombing space-ships are over the largest cities of Earth, blasting them into nothingness, smashing them to powder, wiping out their inhabitants. I've called on them to surrender and save their lives and property, but until they hear from you, they intend to fight on, at any cost.

"Do you hear, Hughes? I'm destroying New York, London, Paris, Buenos Aires, Tokio, Berlin and Rio de Janeiro right now!"

**T**HE Martian sank back in his seat, panting with excitement.

Marshal Hughes stared into his enemy's eyes and spoke calmly. "You lie interestingly but unconvincingly, Ankeen."

Ankeen stood up, his eight feet of height curved over the Earthman. With a wide mocking grin, he hissed, "Then watch this, my dear marshal."

He turned to the curtain-draped wall behind him. Tugging at a cord, he drew the curtain aside, revealing a great television screen covering the entire wall. He snapped a switch to darken the room and turned on the television receiver.

"By my order," he said, "some of the ships attacking Earth are televising the battle and are transmitting by beam to Mars. You will now see for yourself how helpless Earth is."

On the huge screen, blurred patches of light were resolving themselves into a clear picture. There on the screen, in full natural color, appeared a night view of London from the air.

High over the sprawling, blacked-out metropolis, lighted only by the moon, the spherical Martian war vessels whirled and zoomed, dropping showers of small but deadly atomite bombs that blasted great craters out of the close-packed buildings.

From the ground below, beams of explosive light flashed upwards, seeking the attackers. Once, twice, and again the beams found their marks and Martian ships blasted apart in vast blinding flashes of light. But there were hundreds of Martian ships, and the defense batteries on the ground were rapidly going out of action as bombs fell on or near them.

Ankeen twisted a dial and abruptly the scene shifted to New York. Hughes felt a spasm of homesickness as he recognized the familiar towers of Manhattan, reaching skywards a mile and more over the slender island.

Here, too, clouds of Martian ships floated over the city, scattering destruction. A few squadrons of Earth's battle fleet tore wildly back and forth in a futile counter-attack. Greatly outnumbered, they would all soon be ripped to fragments.

**T**HOUGH the marshal sat rigidly still, within him his heart was pounding fiercely as he watched the uneven battle, his men, his brave men, fighting with such courage, when courage alone was not enough. They needed ships, and had so few. Ankeen was right; he had to order them to surrender. This slaughter was unnecessary and futile.

The scene shifted from place to place as the Martian operating the televisor changed the direction of the scanner. Hughes groaned in despair as he caught an upward glimpse of the rows and rows of gleaming Martian ships against the night sky. How many times he had stood on a high

Manhattan roof to study the stars in the quiet night. And now the scintillating pin-points were almost blotted out by the ranks of fighting ships.

A brilliant flash momentarily hid the sky. A lucky hit by a Martian cruiser had wiped out an entire squadron of Earth's valiant defenders.

But Hughes ignored the disaster, his mind whirling with bewilderment over something he'd glimpsed just before that brilliant flash. He waited anxiously for another upwards view.

The television scanner dropped for a close view of the wreckage on Manhattan. From end to end, the buildings lay in tumbled heaps of brick and steel, and still the remaining defense batteries spit forth their reply to the Martians.

Then the scene turned upwards again, to the swarms of vessels passing and repassing overhead. Hughes strained his eyes desperately. He had to be sure before he made his decision. His eyes flashed over the screen. Yes . . . there it was again. . . .

"Ankeen!" Hughes' voice was hoarse with despair. "Turn it off. You were right. There's no use fighting against such odds."

As the room was lighted again, the Martian leaped eagerly to his desk, trembling with exultation at his victory. Quickly he scrawled a few words on a sheet of paper and thrust it at the Earthman.

Hughes read it, nodded slowly, and said, "If I sign this, you must send me back to Earth at once to organize reconstruction."

Ankeen hastily nodded agreement and Hughes signed the paper. It was a declaration of complete and unconditional surrender.

Shoulders drooping, Hughes rose and strode to a window to stare out at the night sky over Mars, while An-

keen, chortling gleefully, called his underlings and issued orders to inform the fighting ships of the surrender.

From the window, Hughes asked irrelevantly, "Ankeen, did you ever study astronomy?"

"Astronomy!" snorted the Martian, looking up from a mass of papers, "Why should a practical man like me read about stars? I don't need to know space navigation. I never leave Mars. Why'd you ask?" he demanded, eyeing Hughes with keen suspicion.

"Oh, no special reason. Just that the stars are so clear here on Mars because of the thin atmosphere. Saturn and Jupiter are visible now. And that beautiful blue planet there! That's Earth, my home!"

Ankeen stared at him in surprise, then shouted disgustedly. "Bah! What silly sentiment! Come along, my dear poet, I'll arrange to send you back to your beautiful blue planet, so you can spend all your time star-gazing. Astronomy! Hah!"

TWO days later, Ankeen sat in his headquarters, impatiently waiting for a communication from his fleet commander. At Ankeen's order, the Martian fleet had withdrawn from Earth and had returned to its bases on Earth's moon for repairs and refueling. On Luna also was the remainder of Earth's fleet, surrendered under the terms of the armistice. Meanwhile his spies on Earth reported that the Earthmen were abandoning their defenses, as promised by Marshal Hughes.

All this news made Ankeen swell with satisfaction. So far his plans were working out perfectly. One more step remained, one small step.

As soon as preparations were completed, Ankeen gloated, his fleet would attack Earth again—and undefended Earth now—and without warning

would completely destroy all factories, industries and cities, just as he had smashed the nations on Venus and Jupiter's moons after they had surrendered.

That would remove forever the last obstacle to Mars' domination of the solar system. Then indeed would Ankeen be supreme in the universe and never would another planet grow strong enough to challenge Mars!

His happy musings were interrupted by the buzz of the televisor. That would be his fleet commander reporting that all was ready for the attack on Earth.

It *was* his fleet commander, but one look at the man's panic-stricken face sent a pulse of terror through Ankeen.

"General!" the fleet commander gasped. "We have been tricked! The Earthmen are attacking us!"

"What!" screamed Ankeen shrilly. "With what ships? Why are you not fighting back?"

"We did not expect attack and our ships were all in the repair sheds. The crews were outside the ships, resting. We are being destroyed on the ground before we can man the guns. Oh, now they are blasting the buildings here and—"

The screen lighted with a blinding glare, then faded into darkness. On the moon, the televisor had just been blown to bits, together with an entire Martian space-ship base.

Before Ankeen could choke down his fury, the screen lighted under a new signal. Marshal Hughes appeared, seated at the controls of a battle cruiser.

Ankeen's lidless eyes bulged in uncontrollable rage as he shrieked curses at the Earthman.

"You broke your word!" he howled finally. "You tricked me into believing you would surrender! Forever will your deceit be remembered by Mars

and I will destroy Earth utterly for your swindle!"

"Shut up," snapped Hughes coldly. "I keep my word when it is honestly obtained, but you got me to sign that surrender *under false pretenses*, and you know it. The entire world will know it, *and I knew it when I signed it!*"

The Martian stared dumbly, strangled by disappointment and fury.

"That was a good job of acting you did two days ago," said Hughes, smiling. "You had me convinced by telling me part of the truth. It was true that Earth's fleet was mostly destroyed, but you didn't tell me that your fleet was also almost all smashed, too. You didn't tell me you feared another battle might finish what was left of your fleet, and so you decided to try trickery.

"Nor did you tell me you intended to destroy Earth's industries and cities after we surrendered. But I remembered what you did to Venus and Jupiter and I knew you'd do the same to Earth."

**H**UGHES paused, smiled contemptuously at the speechless Martian, and went on calmly.

"I still had an ace up my sleeve, Ankeen, which I wouldn't have used if you'd been honest. Forty new, modern battle rockets were my ace, built secretly and just finished. We caught your men completely by surprise, and so now, my dear Ankeen, *I must ask you to surrender!*"

The Martian gurgled and gasped, curses and oaths pouring from his rage-distorted mouth.

"Shall I tell you how I knew you were tricking me, my dear Ankeen?" Hughes went on, mimicking the mocking tone Ankeen had once used, "how I knew that the 'television' views of your fleet attacking Earth

were just *motion pictures*?"

Hughes grinned as he continued. "A beautiful work of art, my dear Ankeen. Very accurate models of Earth's cities, those were.

"But you missed one point, Ankeen! When I saw the sky on that screen, I could see the planets. If the scene were really on Earth, at this time of

year, I should have seen a red planet—Mars. Instead I saw a blue planet—Earth! And so I knew without doubt that those scenes had occurred *on Mars!*

"Why should a practical man like you read about the stars, Ankeen? I guess you can answer that question yourself now!"

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