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STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

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BLIND FLIGHT

by Millard Verne Gordon

When the conquest of space is accomplished, do not suppose that it will be like navigating a celestial sea. Sailors see the sea but space-fliers may never see the stars!

EDWARD SEDGWICK took a last glimpse at the steel sphere he was to occupy for the next few days, glanced once again at the blue sky, shook hands with the head of the Commission on Space Flight, climbed up the metal ladder and crawled into the circular orifice just under the sphere's equator. As he progressed on hands and knees down the narrow tubular passage, the hissings and clicks of the thick metal plug being fastened hermetically behind him, brought to his attention that he was now entirely cut off from the world of man.

The huge ball, towards whose exact center he so laboriously crawled, was about one hundred feet in diameter and perfectly spherical. Though the outer surface was honeycombed with vents and sensitive cells, there was no window or viewing port of any description. Sedgwick was being interred alive in the middle of this globe of metal, yet, as the clicks of other metal partitions fell into place behind him, he was not afraid in the slightest.

He had wondered whether he would feel fear when the day for the real test came. Sometimes he had awakened at night with a cold sweat and a ghastly dream of burial alive in an iron coffin. Yet now, as he neared the little bubble in the core, he realized in a detached objective sort of way that he was quite calm and collected. He knew that was the factor which had made him desirable for this job, nonetheless each time he realized it, it came as a sort of surprise.

Now he climbed down into the control bubble and the last disc swung shut, sealing off the pas-

sage. He seated himself in the heavily cushioned arm-chair that swung so marvelously on universal pivots. He could swing this chair around by merely shifting his body so that it could face any conceivable part of the perfectly globoid interior of his chamber. No matter to the fact that if he tried it now he might be hanging upside down. Very soon things like up and down would cease to exist save as unfunctioning markings on two or three of the innumerable dials and meters that studded the control bubble's interior. He could reach out with a hand and touch anything in it, so small was it, yet he was not stifled or crowded. He had switched on the air and conditioning mechanism as soon as he entered and he knew that the living conditions in the tiny room would remain habitable and comfortable indefinitely.

Fool-proof automatic controls were in operation. The air was constantly being cleansed and replaced. The temperature of the chamber would never vary by more than two degrees no matter what the outside conditions were.

Sedgwick strapped himself in and swiveled around to face the planet-level controls. From his central position he was like the base of a will that drives a body from its hidden place in the skull-encircled brain. His eyes drifted easily over the readings with the skill that came of months' intensive training. Outside temperature on top of the sphere was 85, on the bottom 64. It was a hot day and the sun shining on the metal did that, he knew. He knew exactly which way he now faced and exactly what atmospheric conditions

were. He glanced at the time and saw that he should start. He reached over and turned a switch. Power was on now and the lights on the sphere's exterior glowed. That was a signal to the crowd outside to clear away.

He allowed five minutes and then pressed eight buttons on the rocket panel and threw the master control. There was a slight jar and he felt his seat taking up the added pressure of his body. His acceleration meter was now in operation and he watched carefully as his speed mounted. The sphere was plunging upwards into the sky, his controls told him, the rocket vents on the earth-side of the globe blasting away. He set more of them into operation and his velocity increased sharply. As he watched his speed mount, he never let his eyes lose track of the other salient recorders. It was an old practise and he was not worried. His acceleration was steady, rockets firing in order, fuel flow proper, surface temperature changing rapidly, air-pressure dropping swiftly. Tubes recorded no overheating.

A glance at the photosensitive meters for the surface cells revealed that it was now almost fully dark outside. Things were in perfect order.

For a half hour the great sphere continued its acceleration upwards. When finally the velocity dial registered what he wanted the pilot cut the rockets entirely. Far in the recess of the globe, automatic switches cut out the feed to each of the many rocket jets set near the surface and the explosive liquid fuel ceased to feed into the semi-atomic blasters. The sphere

floated free. It was no longer in the Earth's atmosphere but in the realm of interplanetary space.

SEDGWICK noted that gravity had ceased now that the ship was at rest. He knew that his velocity, even with the rockets off, would continue unabated. The sphere had passed the escape-speed for Terra. It was in free space, the dials registered no pressure on the hull. To one side a dial noted a steady flow of heat, that would be the sun. On another side registered a dim flow of light. That would be the earth-glow. The rest was darkness.

But the man was strapped in his seat and there was nothing loose in the bubble and, outside of the curious feeling in his stomach and head and the indisputable evidence of the omniscient meters, there was no evidence that the sphere was free of planetary gravity, free in the empty void between the planets.

From his photo-cells, the pilot knew what things were like outside. He flicked another button and cameras in the surface took a record of the scene, a record which would be much more accurate than anything he could see with the naked eye.

Sedgwick wondered whether man ever would see space with the bare eye. He glanced at another part of his controls and reflected that it was unlikely. Cosmic rays were bombarding the craft with incredible fury, unhampered by a hundred miles of atmosphere which alone kept life from being burned out of existence on earth. Here, he knew that only several shells of thick lead and steel, fifty feet of metal machinery in any direction, concentrations of chemicals and fuel, air supplies, food and swarms of wire, kept the cosmic rays from reaching him and torturing the life from his flesh.

Protoplasm is a very delicate chemical compound, the thought

suddenly occurred to Sedgwick, and it must be kept carefully sealed from raw force. It survived only within certain very narrow limits of temperature and under certain very restricted conditions of gases. Here he glanced again at the conditioning charts but all was well. Those limited conditions that kept his metal fish-bowl fit for the fish were working to perfection. Metal and rubber, plastics and glass, electricity and atoms, all lifeless and unimaginative, were harnessed here to keeping the little bit of water and carbon mush that was Edward Sedgwick liquescent. The subjective term was "alive."

Still, this little bit of mush, this complex and unstable compound that was man, had built for itself the means wherewith it could master the antagonistic cosmos. Here was man, here within this little bubble of air in the midst of this greater bubble of metal, bravely dashing around in the domain hitherto exclusively reserved for planets and comets and suns. Mankind had usurped the privileges of stars and Sedgwick was the first to exercise this conquest.

He reset his meters. His chair swivelled slightly. Rapidly his hands pressed a half dozen buttons. Acceleration started again. An integrator clicked out a set of numbers in its little glass face. They were set up on the controls and put to work.

He watched the glass panels as the maneuver went into effect. The ship accelerated again. The direction was different. The sun below him. The sphere was heading away from the sun. The earth too was behind. Ahead was Mars. Not directly ahead but the sphere and the planet were both travelling towards the same point in space.

Sedgwick was not going all the way to Mars. He was going only part way there. Cameras would record further data and the globe would return to earth. Maybe it would go all the way to the red planet some day but

this was only a test.

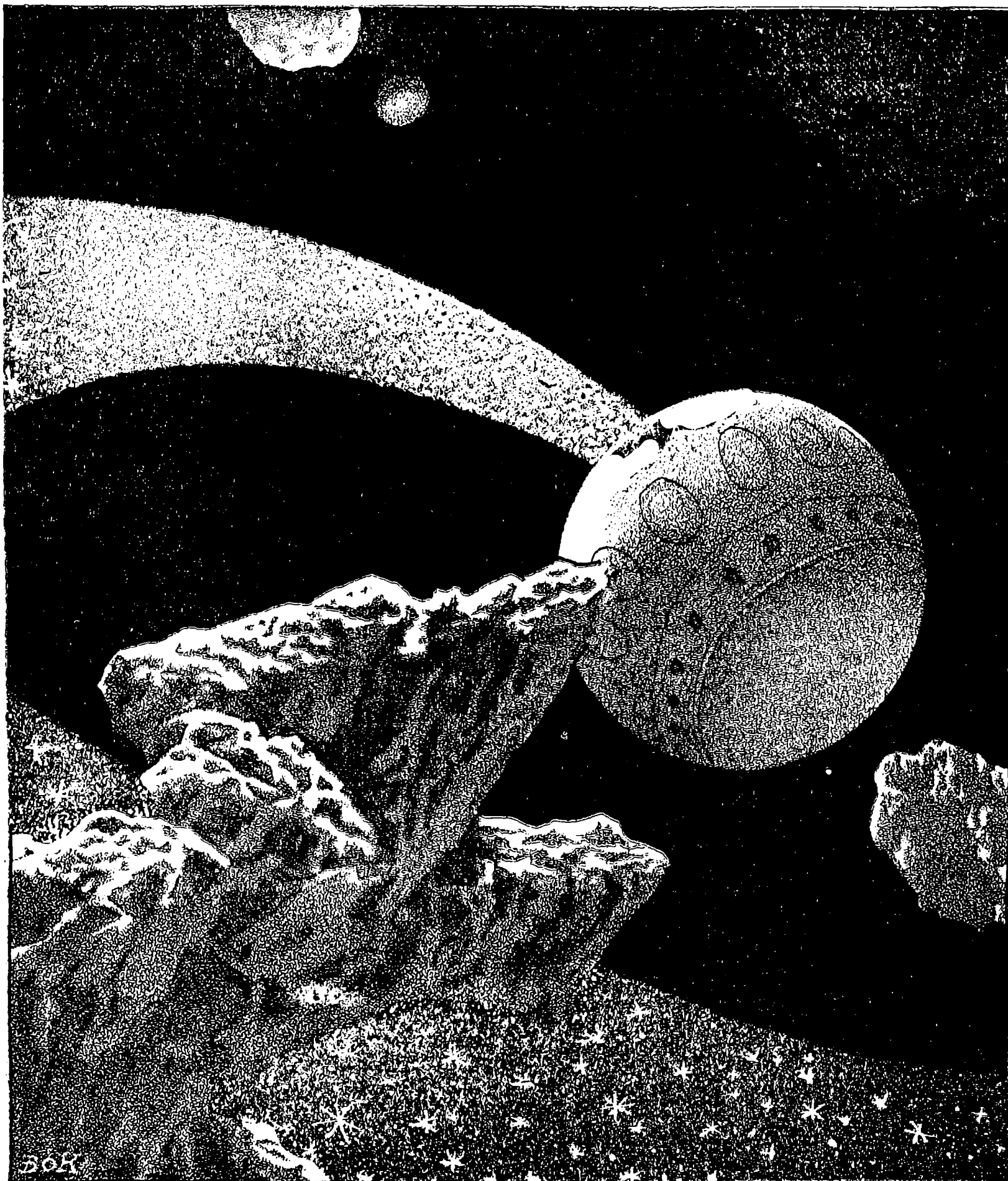
For two days the sphere continued on its course. Acceleration of the rockets had been cut off after about four hours. At that time the metal ball was travelling at an unbelievable speed. Sedgwick could have made Mars in a week at that rate but he knew his limitations and he had his orders. He had been given this post because of his level-headed judgement, he did not betray that trust.

During those forty - eight hours, Sedgwick had little to do besides check his controls. He was fed regularly by an automatic panel which every four hours thrust pellets of food-concentrate at him and the nozzle of a water valve. Also he cat-napped when he felt tired. Automatic alarms would have awakened him if there had been need.

At one time there had been a momentary flickering of gravitation dials. There was nothing to be done for what was detected was a sizable body about fifty thousand miles away. The sizable body being undoubtedly an asteroid of perhaps ten miles diameter. No concern.

Only one other thing broke the monotony. One of a cluster of photosensitive cells on the sphere's skin went black. It was smashed. A meteor obviously, a tiny pellet of rock flying through space. Sedgwick wondered why more had not hit him; he had expected more trouble than that. Then he realized that after all space was really terribly terribly empty and besides it was possible a number of others had hit the surface where it would not be detected nor indeed make any difference.

THE SPHERE was brought to a halt at the proper time and hung in space slowly revolving on its own axis. It was now about six million miles from Mars and there it would wait for ten hours or so until the red planet had been thoroughly photographed by the



Illustrations by Bok

telescopic cameras and recorded in other ways by other instruments.

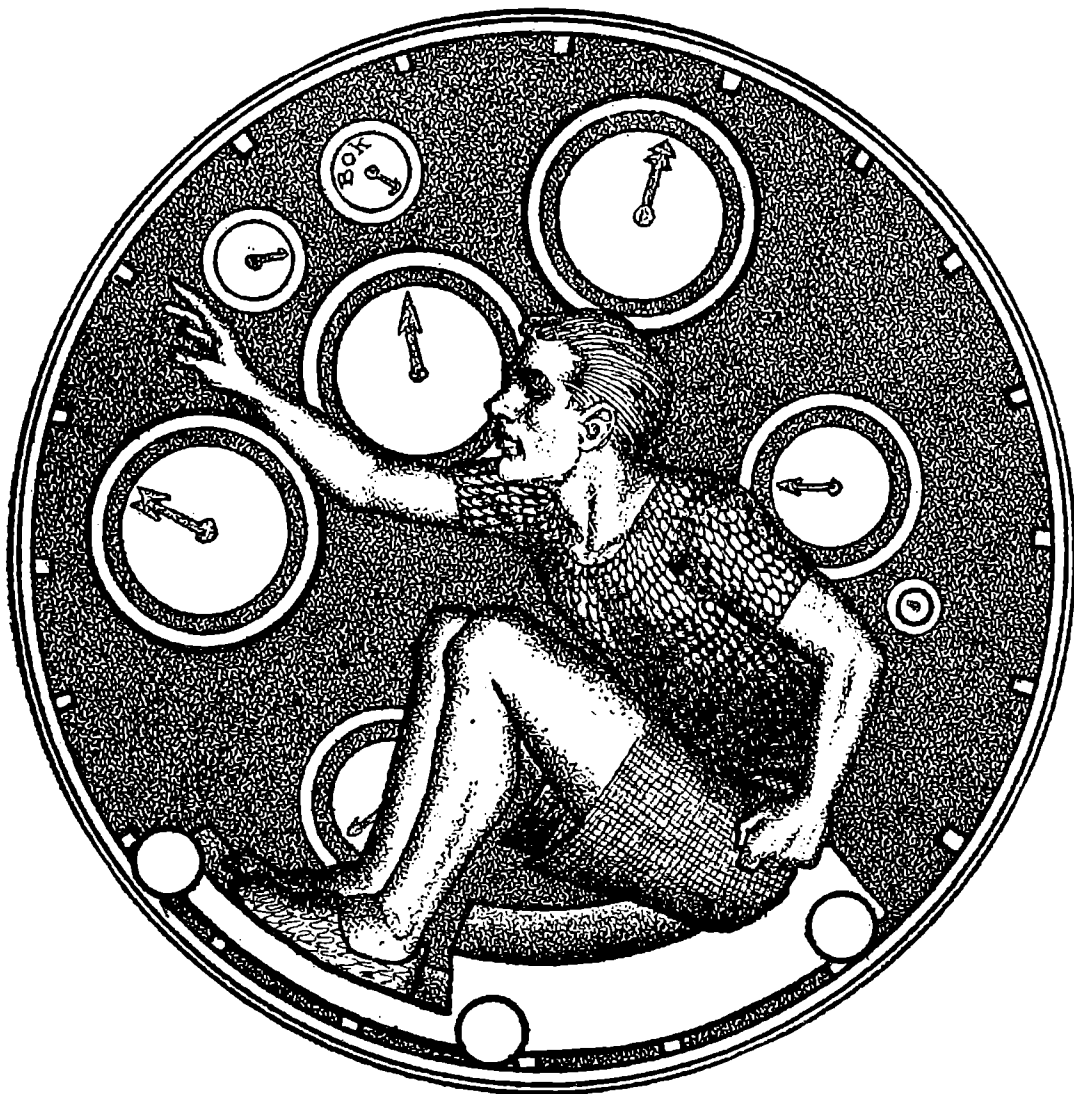
The man could detect where it was by the glow registering on the surface cell clusters. He could tell where it was by the gravitational directives functioning on the panels. He could tell

exactly its mass and speed, his own speed, the Earth's, the sun's and every other major body's. He knew what their orbits were and what was to be done to bring the ship back to Earth.

He laughed to himself briefly when the thought struck him that he had now been in space

almost three days and yet had not set eyes on the stars. It struck him that that was probably the longest such period away from a sight of the stars that he had ever been in his life. And yet, actually, he was surrounded by them!

As he was setting the dials to



bring the ship back in an Earth-bound orbit, another gravitational recorder started functioning. A body about ten thousand miles away, a small body. Presumably another wandering asteroid. They should be frequent here even though this was inside the orbit of Mars. Many asteroids crossed that orbit even though the majority stayed between Mars and Jupiter.

Casually Sedgwick computed the orbit of the new body, saw that it would pass well beyond him and paid it no further attention. It was not until after rockets were accelerating the sphere back towards the Earth that he noticed that his original calculation on the new asteroidal body was in error. Apparently the mass would pass uncommonly close to where the sphere was. Perturbed over the original mistake, which should have been impossible, he speeded up the rocket a bit and shifted the globe slightly. It should be sufficient to put distance between the asteroid and the ball.

Later he noticed that mistake

had again occurred. The asteroid was still heading for an intersection with his sphere. Either the tiny planet had changed its orbit, which was impossible, or somehow the wires and mechanisms of the outside sensitives were deranged. That was possible and it was also dreadfully serious. A meteor perhaps? It might have buried itself into something and created a short circuit somewhere. The dials showed no such thing though and it was unlikely that any single meteor could have fooled all the dials.

Again he shifted the sphere's course and this time he watched the dials registering the asteroid. Sure enough the gravitational sensitives altered slowly and surely to bring the foreign body's shift into a new orbit that would keep it on an intersection with the sphere.

Then Sedgwick noticed something else. That the speed of the asteroid had altered, had accelerated. If the fixed velocity of the little astral wanderer had been the same, it would not have

mattered much where it headed. The velocity of the globe was so much greater and was quite capable of outrunning any natural body. But the speed of this strange body had altered; it had speeded up and it had not lost anything of the original distance between them. In fact the man now realized that it was accelerating even more than his sphere and was steadily closing the gap!

This was no asteroid. He was sure of that now. Coldly sure of it and he wondered at himself for his own coolness. Then with a start he recognized his own emotion. It was that calmness that settled over him with every stress and emergency. This then was a serious crisis.

What was this body? He dared not think and yet he knew he must. There was one conclusion and one only. No comet, no asteroid, no meteor could change its orbit. No lifeless body could speed itself up and so diabolically and consistently keep its path in space so that it would overhaul and meet up with the sphere no matter what shift the latter made. This was, this could only be, an artificially created mass, an intelligently directed body, another space-travelling vehicle for an intelligent race!

But from where? From Earth never. From Mars then? Maybe. It was a likely possibility. He had approached Mars. He had hung for a while in space surveying it. Could it be that Mars was protected? That Mars was patrolled? That something was coming to investigate him?

Sedgwick had no mind to allow that. He knew several things. One, that he had no means of communicating with another space-sphere. Two, that his first duty was to bring back his sphere safe and intact with all its records unimpaired. Three, that if alien hands or alien machines tried to pry into his craft, it would almost certainly accomplish ruin and his death.

Therefore Sedgwick ran. Rapidly he activated rockets as fast as the increasing velocity

and acceleration would permit. And as his speed increased, he kept refiguring his orbits so as to cut his path to Earth shorter.

AS THE sphere ran, so did the pursuer. When one put on a burst of speed, so did the other. Steadily the distance between the two bodies grew less. Hours went by and the sphere was blasting along at minimum possible acceleration. Now the alien body was close, was within a mile or so and still gaining.

Sedgwick was able to determine more things about the enigma. His registers were delicate enough to detect things they could not while it was far away. The other thing was several times larger than the globe, it was egg-shaped, and it had a high reflecting scale such as polished metal would have.

It was obvious that the pursuer must be gotten rid of within the next hour or all would be lost anyway. At this speed of travel, he would have to start decelerating soon or else the sphere would overshoot the Earth and never return. There was no further dodging or outrunning possible. Now he would have to fight it.

The ship had guns. Sedgwick had laughed at the Commission when they had installed them. He had said that they could never expect to use them and now he knew that whoever it was on the Commission that had ordered them had more foresight than seemed.

The guns were six in number, two at the poles and four along the equator. They did not project from the surface. Only the pit of their muzzles showed and they were covered with sliding metal discs when not in use. They were naval ordinance, loaded by automatic feeds, fired by the rocket fuel and hurling shells filled with terrifically powerful explosives.

The recoil of a gun firing was taken by automatic discharge of a blank shot from the gun on

the opposite side of the sphere. In this way the course of the globe was not altered by the recoil.

Sedgwick shifted the sphere slightly until one of his polar guns was aimed at the pursuer. Then he waited. This shot had to be effective. He dared not miss or blunder.

Steadily the sphere roared on towards Earth and steadily the strange pursuer followed, closer and closer. It narrowed the distance from a mile to a half mile. Sedgwick was impelled to fire but restrained himself. Through his head floated the old Bunker Hill injunction about waiting for the whites of their eyes. This shot had to be good. He knew nothing of the armament of the mysterious follower, therefore his first shot would have to be the deciding one.

Now he watched the dials closely. The giant egg was a few hundred yards away. His finger rested on the firing button. For a second it hesitated and then pressed down.

He never noticed the shock for it was counterbalanced. But he saw the meter of the gun rapidly check off shots as shells slid one after another into the breach and were blasted off point-blank at the strange mass. One, two, three, four, five. . . .

Then suddenly the sphere received a blow as if a giant bat had swung and connected with it. The pilot's chair swung wildly about on its gymbals and all the instruments vibrated madly. When it had steadied again, Sedgwick saw that the sphere

was hurtling away from the scene of the shooting. The dials registered the terrific explosion that must have taken place. The concussion had hurled the globe off its course.

Where there had been a gravitational force manifesting close by, now there was none. The pursuer was no more. It must have blown to smithereens when the shells struck it.

Sedgwick rapidly recalculated his course and shot on homeward towards the Earth. A number of photo-cells were blank on the explosion side, several rocket tubes were out of commission and other things connected with that side were awry. The sphere, however, was entirely under control and quite navigable.

Landing blind was not so hard as he had only to follow the radio beam. The radio had stopped functioning as soon as he had left the Earth as had been predicted and it had started again when the sphere successfully eased to within five miles of the surface. The great ball slid gently on its rockets into the field of its origin and came to rest.

When Sedgwick had crawled out through the exit tube and had shaken himself free from the stiffness of his muscles and the hands of the small crowd, he realized that it was night and the stars were shining down. That was what held his attention the longest, that and the great gobs of raw black *flesh* that had smeared over the sphere's side when the unseen pursuer exploded.