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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECOND VOICE ***

We proudly enter a new name in the science-fiction sweepstakes. This is Mr. Rubin's initial appearance in the field. His literary efforts to date add up quite handsomely, we think. QUOTE. *I have sold to the TV show, TALES OF TOMORROW and two literary quarterlies have published my fiction. Last year I won the Stephen Vincent Benét Award for my one-act plays produced at Stanford University.* UNQUOTE. *The reading pleasure is yours.*

the second voice

by ... Mann Rubin

Spud, world-famous dummy, talks to Mars with surprising results.

CRAWFORD COMPLETED the rehearsal in less than an hour. He listened to the orchestra run through its selections, okayed the song the guest vocalist had chosen, then finished up with a long dialogue between Spud and himself. When it was over he checked timing with the program director, made a few script changes and conferred briefly with a Special Service Officer about the number of troops the auditorium could hold. Everything was running smoothly. It was going to be a neat, action-packed show.

Backstage he looked at his watch. He had almost two hours before the regular show began and he was restless. Two hours at Harlow Field could seem like two years. Guards and restrictions all over the place.

Harlow Field was the largest experimental base in the world, a veritable garden of atoms, the proving grounds for every secret weapon ever imagined. The security and the tight regulations gave Crawford the jitters on each of his visits.

He smoked a cigarette and tried making small talk with some of the soldiers on backstage detail. He posed for a picture and gave an interview to a reporter from an army newspaper, then excused himself and went to his dressing room with Spud propped in the crook of his arm.

He was used to it now; the applause, the audiences, the pictures, the autographs, the fuss. Everywhere the response was the same. They had either seen him in the movies or on television or in the nightclubs, where he first broke in his act. Now they wanted to establish an identity with him, to touch the merchandise, to stand close so that they could write home about the visiting celebrity. Crawford was a realist. It was all part of being a name.

It had taken him just five years to make the big time. Five years of road shows, coast-to-coast tours, one-night stands and a dummy named Spud to make him the hottest ventriloquist in the business. His act was tight, well-paced and popular. He had a weekly radio show, a television program and a seven-year contract with a major Hollywood studio. He was riding high.

Still he hadn't forgotten the soldiers. Two months each year he took time off to travel the USO circuit. His agent tore his hair, reminding him of the financial losses, but the USO had given him his first break so he had always answered their call. He liked enthusiastic audiences and the cheering of laugh-hungry men made him happy. Entertainment was his business and he enjoyed exhibiting his talent. The wider the audience the better he liked it.

His dressing room was located back of the auditorium. He closed the door behind him, put Spud on a chair and began getting out of his rehearsal clothes. He lit a cigarette and looked at himself

in the mirror. He was tired and needed a shave. In the last week the pace had been fast. The USO tour still had a few days to run, but he was looking forward to its end. A vacation, the luxury of relaxation would all be his then.

He opened a drawer of the dressing table and pulled out a bottle of Scotch. There were two hours to be killed before the show. He drank a shot and thought about it. A shower, a shave, a good dinner and a walk around the base would consume the time. After the show he would drive back to town and check in at a hotel for a good night's sleep.

He was putting the bottle back in the drawer when a knock sounded on the door. He said "Come in," thinking it was one of the cast and didn't turn around. He heard the door open, glanced into the mirror and glimpsed Colonel Meadows, the Commanding Officer of Harlow Field, and a man in civilian clothes he didn't recognize. He turned around, reached for a bathrobe.

"Don't mind us, Robbie," said the Colonel. "Just dropped by to say hello." He was a small, plump man and his face was always red and perspiring. Crawford knew him slightly from the other two times he had played Harlow Field, but this was the first time the Colonel had ever paid him a backstage visit.

"Got a fan here who wants to meet you," continued the Colonel. "Shake hands with Dr. Paul Shalt, one of our base scientists. He and I just caught your rehearsal. Fine, very fine."

The doctor's name struck a chord and Crawford dug deep until it focused. Dr. Paul Shalt was a physicist working with the army. He specialized in the development of radar, was the chief developer of the electrical detonator used in atomic bombs.

"I enjoyed your performance very much," said Dr. Shalt. "Your voice is extraordinary." He had a smooth, angular face, black hair and black, penetrating eyes. "Amazing range."

"Thanks," said Crawford.

"And the clearness of tone is phenomenal," said Dr. Shalt. "Has it always been like that?"

Crawford nodded. "When I was a kid it embarrassed me, my voice," he said, smiling. "A trick voice, everybody called it. But it's a definite asset to a practitioner of the art of ventriloquism."

"You should have seen Dr. Shalt while you were on stage," said Colonel Meadows, beaming at him. "He was running all over the auditorium testing your voice with one of his gadgets."

Crawford grinned. "I didn't realize I moved my audience so."

Dr. Shalt laughed. "What Colonel Meadows says is true. I'm *very* interested in your vocal range. While you rehearsed I tested the quality and sound of your tone." He stopped, looked around the room until he discovered Spud where Crawford had put him on the chair. He walked over to the dummy and touched the wooden head with his hand.

"Actually it's a *second voice*, that sound and vibration you use for Spud. It's perfect, perfect for what I need, that second voice."

Dr. Shalt put the dummy back in the position he had found him in, reached into his pocket and brought out a small glass-enclosed instrument which he held in front of him.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, approaching the dressing table.

"Never saw it before," Crawford said, examining the gadget. A small arrow flickered nervously within a glass cage.

"It's called a Voice Oscillator," explained Dr. Shalt. "It's sensitive to the slightest tonal inflection. We use it to measure the pitch and volume of a human voice."

"What's all this got to do with me?" Crawford asked.

"This—we want to use the voice of Spud for an experiment. A very important experiment. With your permission, we'd like to do it immediately."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," said Crawford. "I have a show in about—"

"Our equipment is all set up," interrupted the doctor. "The entire test will take forty-five minutes. We'll have you back in no time."

Crawford frowned. He was tired and he'd looked forward to relaxing a while before the show. "Couldn't we make it some other time," he said.

The Colonel spoke then. "Robbie, do you remember reading four years ago that our radar system was able to beam signals to the moon and have them returned?"

"Sure," said Crawford. "It got a big play in all the newspapers."

"Well, our scientists are now ready to conduct a similar experiment," said Colonel Meadows. "This time to Mars."

"To Mars!" repeated Crawford, wondering what it had to do with him.

"Only this time we plan to send a *voice*, a human voice that can travel through interstellar space," said Dr. Shalt.

"But that's impossible!" Crawford exclaimed.

"With the average voice, yes," said Dr. Shalt. "Cosmic disturbances would drown out a normal voice amplified a thousand times beyond its regular frequency. But a voice in a higher octave—like your second voice ... Well, we believe there's a certain resonant intonation which can be curved and regulated in any direction, in the voice you use for your dummy."

Crawford nodded.

"Spud's voice contains that quality," continued Dr. Shalt. "I believe it can reach Mars and bounce back. I'm asking you to be the first man ever to throw his voice to another planet."

There was quiet for a moment when he finished. Crawford's cigarette had gone out and he relit it. The smoke steadied him. Outside, in the auditorium the orchestra had begun to rehearse again.

"Where's the station set-up?" asked Crawford finally.

"It's right here on the field, Robbie," Colonel Meadows said quickly. "We've had it under wraps for the last eight months. It'll be a tremendous thing if it works."

Crawford dragged on his cigarette a last time and stamped it out. He walked over to Spud, lifted the dummy into position in the crook of his arm.

"What do you say, Crawford?" asked Dr. Shalt. There was a note of urgency in his voice.

"I don't know," said Crawford slowly. "My crazy voice is my bread and butter. Can't you use somebody else? Somebody whose voice isn't his life?"

"We've wasted weeks testing every man on this field," said Dr. Shalt solemnly. "The average voice becomes static as soon as it gets past Earth's atmosphere. But your voice can break through. I've studied every vibration, every quiver of it. It bends and flexes with each cosmic pressure. You *must* let us try."

Crawford looked at Colonel Meadows.

"Robbie, I promise you there's no danger involved," the Colonel said. "There's been a great deal of time and effort put into this project and we'd like to see it work. This week Mars and Earth are the closest they'll be for the next three years, so it must be done *now*. It's your duty to help in this important project."

Crawford nodded. The matter of patriotism and duty had not occurred to him. "Of course, Colonel, I'll be glad to help."

He looked down at the dummy. "What do you say, Spud? Want to be the first voice to reach Mars?"

"Sounds crazy," came the high, squeaking reply. "But it ought to put us in the history books." Spud's glass eyes shifted to the other two men in the room and one lid winked. "Calling Mars! This is Spud O'Malley, old quiver voice himself, coming in for a landing."

"Good! You'll do it," said Dr. Shalt excitedly. "And if we succeed the publicity will be worldwide."

"Sure," said Crawford. "An actor likes publicity. But are you sure my voice won't be strained?"

"I'm sure," Dr. Shalt said. "You'll be talking into a microphone in the same tone you use for a broadcast. Nothing more."

"How long will it take?" asked Crawford.

Dr. Shalt checked his watch. "Fifteen minutes for the voice to reach Mars and fifteen minutes for its return." He took out a black notebook from his jacket pocket and began to outline the plan while Colonel Meadows put through a call to the laboratory.

Spud's voice was to be relayed directly to a giant amplifying unit which would project it into space. Those regulating the voice in the control room would hear nothing but vibrations because of the high frequency it would immediately attain while passing through. Only on its return from Mars would Spud's voice become audible on Earth. It sounded fantastic but Dr. Shalt spoke of it as if it were a certainty and Crawford knew he was recognized as a great scientist.

A few minutes later Colonel Meadows hung up the phone. He said excitedly, "Everything's set. All the equipment is ready and there's a command car waiting outside."

Crawford caught a quick glimpse of himself in the mirror. No shower, no shave, no quiet dinner, no walk; all that would have to come later. He'd been hooked. "I'm ready any time you are," he said. He folded Spud in his arms and followed the two men to the door.

They did not speak much in the car. The laboratory was on the Northern rim of the field, a ten-

minute drive from the auditorium. Approaching the building, Crawford noticed the high radar towers and the steel fences surrounding its frame. They rode past three different guard posts and numerous military policemen before the car halted at the main entrance.

Immediately they were ushered into a small broadcasting studio which was soundproofed and closed off by a heavy metal door. This was Dr. Shalt's home grounds and he took charge.

A microphone had been set up and Dr. Shalt had Crawford test Spud's voice while a technician in the control booth measured it acoustically. After an exact tone had been determined for the amplification unit, Dr. Shalt briefed him on some details, patted him on the back and disappeared into the control booth followed by Colonel Meadows.

Crawford lit another cigarette and smoked nervously while he awaited the go-ahead signal. There was a dry tightness in his throat and he concentrated on relaxing his tension.

High on the studio wall a large clock hacked away at the seconds, and behind the glass façade of the control booth he could see Dr. Shalt and his assistant manipulating dials on an intricate panel. It was almost three minutes before he heard another sound beside the creak of his own impatient footsteps. Then Dr. Shalt's voice came on the feed-back, the speaker system connecting the studio with the booth.

"Crawford, talk into the mike when we flash you the sign. Keep talking for a minute. And remember—it's just another broadcast. Good luck."

Crawford nodded, deposited the cigarette in an ashtray. He moved into position and slid his fingers along the inner wires of Spud's back until they fitted into place. Spud's head came alive.

Dr. Shalt brought his right hand down in a long, sweeping motion. A bright red bulb above the control booth winked into life. Robbie Crawford went into his act.

Inside the booth Dr. Shalt, Colonel Meadows and a technician watched Crawford performing in pantomime and listened to the strange vibrations emanating from the speaker. They could distinguish no understandable sound for the amplifier had lifted the voice beyond human hearing as it released it to the stratosphere. They sat quietly, content to wait for the voice to return from its long, lonely journey.

Crawford spoke until he saw Dr. Shalt signal for a conclusion. A moment later the red bulb blinked out and the broadcast was ended. Crawford felt cold and his hands were perspiring freely. He saw the beaming face of Colonel Meadows motioning him to come inside the booth. He wiped his face, and coughed to relieve the tension in his throat.

The Colonel was the first to greet him as he entered the booth, and his handshake was enthusiastic and firm. Dr. Shalt remained bent over one of the instrument boards rotating a dial, but looked up and nodded excitedly.

"It will be another ten minutes," he said. "Sit down. I've sent out for some supper."

"How did it go?" Crawford asked.

"Good! Good! By now it's half way to its destination."

An orderly came in with a tray of sandwiches and coffee and for the next few minutes they ate and Dr. Shalt described the intricacies of the operation. The technician stayed glued to the receiver, earphones resting lightly across his head.

After ten minutes Dr. Shalt stood up and looked at his watch. "It's time," he said. "Turn up the resonator." He moved closer to the receiving set as the others gathered around him. The low hum of the monitor signal became louder as the technician switched on a new lever. The static emerging from the speaker thickened, obliterating all other noises. Another two minutes went by....

Crawford watched it all, aware of the tension and anxiety on each face, feeling the throbbing excitement himself. So they stood, tensely expectant, awaiting the return of his voice....

Suddenly the technician whispered, "I've got it! It's coming! I hear it returning!" He swung around, offering his earphones to Dr. Shalt, who grabbed for them hurriedly. The scientist raised the cups to his ear and waited. The room fell into deeper silence.

"Yes, yes, it's the voice! Turn up the resonator to full volume! We've got it! The voice is completing the circuit!" Dr. Shalt said tensely.

The technician turned another dial as far as it would go. The sound of the static rose to a roar. Then abruptly the static broke, died out and a strange new sound came in. It was Spud! Spud's voice creeping back from a trip to Mars, thirty-five million miles away!

"Hello.... This is the voice of Spud O'Malley. I speak to you from Harlow Field in the United States of America. My voice is being sent to you by a newly invented Amplification Unit developed by Dr. Paul Shalt at this experimental base. This is the first time such an operation has ever been tried. We extend our heartiest greetings, our deepest felicitations ..."

It went on, the high, squeaking voice, friendly, humorous, alive; sending back to them the words that Crawford had spoken into the microphone a few minutes before.

Crawford studied the faces of the other men. They had worked and planned a long time for this single moment, the realization of a long pursued dream. Colonel Meadows was rubbing his hands together gleefully. The voice was reaching its climax. Success was assured. History had been made!

There was a little silence as Spud finished speaking. The technician reached across leisurely to shut off the resonator.

Suddenly the voice started again. The technician's hand froze in mid-air. The same high, squeaking tone, the same inflections, the same pitch. But this time it was commanding, authoritative.

"This is Mars. We have received your voice. We know of you, know your language. We want you to know that we do not like intruders. We want no contact with you. Seek us out no more. The voice was received clearly. It fits our frequency well. We will keep it so that no more communication from you is possible. Let this be a warning. Stay away! We do not want you!"

The voice stopped and there was silence again. Then Colonel Meadows chuckled. "Very clever, Crawford! You really startled me for a moment."

"Yes," said Dr. Shalt, smiling. "So you made a little joke at the end. Very clever."

Crawford's back was to them as he stared at the loudspeaker. His face was contorted in a surprised grimace and the flesh was suddenly white and lifeless. He turned to face them, his body rigid and his mouth trembling as he whispered:

"That voice—that last voice—it wasn't mine! *That wasn't me speaking!*"

Dr. Shalt laughed. "Superb actor. A great performance, Mr. Crawford. We are most grateful to you."

"Robbie's a born comedian," added Colonel Meadows, his eyes sparkling with the humor of the situation. "Never misses a chance to clown."

"Don't you understand—*it wasn't my voice!*" screamed Crawford. He looked from one man to another, his eyes pleading for belief. "The second part was not mine!"

They stared at him, their smiles fading.

Colonel Meadows said, "What do you mean, Robbie?"

"Didn't you hear when I spoke? I never said those last things. Didn't you hear what I said?"

The technician answered him. "We didn't hear a thing, Mr. Crawford. The amplification was too high. It was nothing but mumbling when it passed through this room." He looked at Dr. Shalt for confirmation.

"I explained that to you myself," said the doctor. "You could have recited the Gettysburg Address and we'd never have known until it returned."

Crawford stared down at the limp form of Spud hanging across his arm. He ran a hand across his eyes, dropped the dummy onto the desk. Turning back to Dr. Shalt, he began to speak in a taut, controlled voice.

"Dr. Shalt, I swear to you that was not my voice at the end. I finished with a goodbye. The voice that spoke after that moment of silence was somebody else's voice. It's up to you to find out whose."

"Don't be absurd," said Dr. Shalt, irritably. "That was *your* voice, *your* pitch. The voice of your dummy, Spud." He wasn't going to be taken in by any warped sense of humor. Robbie Crawford was the best ventriloquist in America. He was also noted for his practical jokes. "An experiment of this magnitude shouldn't be treated so lightly," he added acidly.

"You've got to believe me!" screamed Crawford. His voice was choked and his pale face was glistening with perspiration. "It was someone else, imitating my ventriloquist voice! I swear it was not me!"

Colonel Meadows sat down abruptly. The technician ran from the booth and returned a moment later with a glass of water. Colonel Meadows motioned for him to give it to Crawford.

The ventriloquist gulped down the water, then went over and sat down beside the Colonel.

"Look," he said quietly. "I'm not joking and I'm not out of my head. It was a shock to hear a voice so like my own, to hear it threaten us, to know that it's traveling from another world. It's like hearing an echo that shouldn't be."

The Colonel exchanged a puzzled look with Dr. Shalt. After a moment the doctor reached down and picked the dummy up and brought it to Crawford.

"Crawford, listen to me." His voice was gentle, sympathetic. "Perhaps you've been working too hard. These USO trips, the rehearsal, the excitement of the last hour. Maybe you forgot what you said, or said more than you recall."

"I remember everything I said," Crawford said quietly. "I stopped when you gave me the signal."

That voice came after I stopped. Can't you check—?"

A phone in the back of the control booth rang sharply and Colonel Meadows answered it. He spoke for a few moments, then hung up. "That was the stage manager calling from the main auditorium. You've got ten minutes before the show. How do you feel?"

Crawford blinked in surprise. He had almost forgotten the program. He tried to rise, found his legs trembling.

"He's in no condition to put on a show," said Dr. Shalt. "Better postpone it."

"No, no, I'm okay," protested Crawford, walking around the small floor, exercising his hands. "It's my show. They're waiting for me. Let's get going."

In the car, during the ride to the auditorium, he did not speak. He sat with Spud resting snugly against his chest, drumming his fingers on an arm rest while Colonel Meadows and Dr. Shalt talked, tried to convince him of the invalidity in his reasoning. There was a simple explanation for the voice; either he had forgotten part of his speech or maybe some amateur radio ham had somehow managed to pick up their signal and was playing a joke. He was too intelligent a man to be frightened by such coincidence. They spoke to him reassuringly all during the ride. At the stage door he thanked them, then went inside the auditorium to give his performance.

The ovation that greeted him was tremendous. The orchestra played his theme and an army announcer introduced him as the Number One ventriloquist in the world. He walked out slowly from the wing, waving and grinning at the audience with Spud sitting erect on his arm.

The soldiers roared and whistled as Spud's head spun, drooped and tilted in the opening routine that he was famous for. Crawford stopped in the middle of the stage, rested his foot on a chair that had been provided, sat Spud on his knee. The applause dwindled gradually and the other members of the cast moved into their positions. The army announcer walked forward to engage Crawford in conversation—to feed him questions that would be answered in Spud's high, squeaky voice.

"Hi, Robbie, Spud," said the announcer. "What took you so long getting here?"

It was Spud's answer. All eyes focused on the dummy's face as it bent forward and its mouth opened slowly. A wooden hand moved up and scratched a wooden head. But only a gurgle came out of the open mouth!

The announcer looked at Crawford, motioned him to speed up. "Speak up, Spud. Can't hear a word you're saying. No time to be bashful."

Again the dummy's mouth opened, the head bobbed and the eyes blinked. The gurgle became a half-strangled gasp. It whined unsteadily a few moments then broke off completely. The cast in the wings began to stir nervously. Crawford was obviously straining. A vein throbbed in the center of his forehead and his lips were tight over his teeth.

"Stage fright," he said in an aside to the audience. Turning his head aside, he coughed and cleared his throat and pretended to whisper with Spud. "Speak up, Pal. This is what we rehearsed for."

The mouth of the dummy flapped up and down without cadence. The soldiers snickered, squirmed restlessly. A sound started, a low, plaintive wail that broke into a dirge and finally into a wild shriek from Crawford's lips. He screamed and kicked over the chair his foot was balanced on. The dummy toppled to the floor.

"I can't! I can't! My voice is gone!" He was screaming and clutching at his throat, trying to loosen his collar. The curtains closed behind him as soldiers leaped to their feet all over the auditorium.

He screamed, "I've lost my second voice! They took it from me! The Martians stole my voice!"

The announcer grabbed his arms then and tried to lead him from the stage. Crawford shoved him away.

"They took it," cried Crawford. "No matter what they tell you, the Martians took Spud's voice. It fitted their frequency. They'll use it to reach Earth! I can't get it back!"

Colonel Meadows and several MPs who were stationed in the wings came out and dragged him from the platform.

The G.I. audience remained silent a moment longer, then broke into loud, nervous rumbling. Seconds later Colonel Meadows returned to the microphone and held up his hand until the confusion died down. He explained briefly about Dr. Shalt's experiment and how Crawford had been asked to participate. He told how a human voice had been sent to Mars for the first time and how Crawford had suffered a temporary shock on hearing his voice return from this journey.

He assured the audience that Crawford would receive the best medical care and would probably be back performing at the field in a few short weeks. He asked the soldiers to remain in their seats and let the show continue out of respect for a great performer.

The orchestra began the refrain of a popular song and the guest vocalist appeared wearing a white strapless evening gown. She blew warm, friendly kisses to the soldiers. The response she

received was a healthy one.

And the show went on....

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