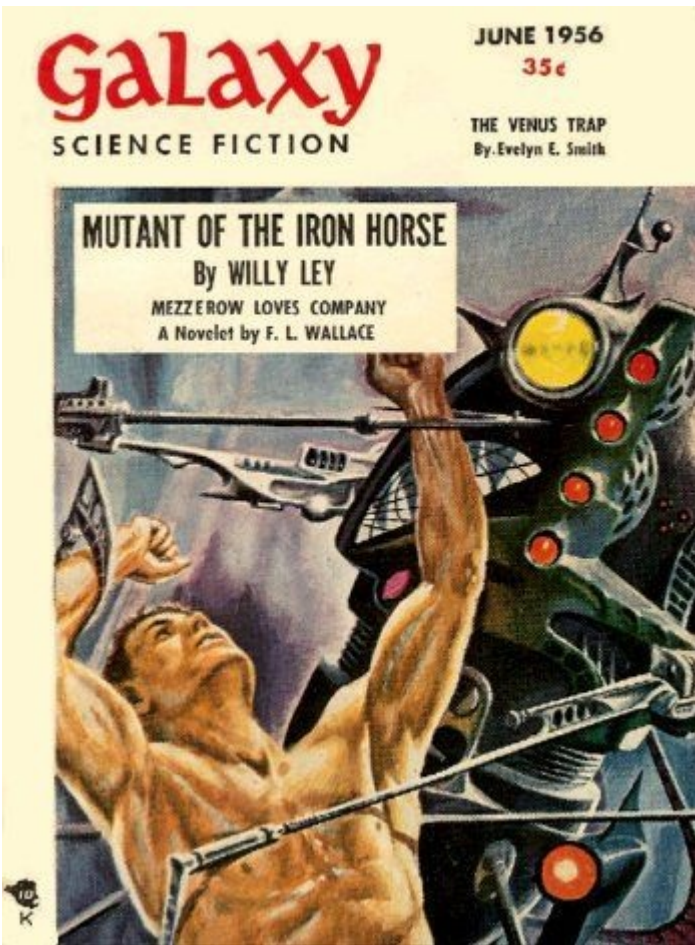


The
Best
British
Short
Stories
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Title: Mezzrow Loves Company

Author: Floyd L. Wallace

Illustrator: EMSH

Release Date: June 7, 2010 [EBook #22319]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MEZZEROW
LOVES COMPANY ***

Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online

Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

Mezzerow Loves Company

By F. L. WALLACE

Illustrated by EMSH

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Galaxy Science Fiction June 1956. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

There were pride and indignation in Mezzerow's mission to Earth and yet a practical reason ... but maybe he should have let bad enough alone!

The official took their passports, scanning the immense variety of stamps he had to choose from. He selected one with multicolored ink that suited his fancy and smeared it against the small square of plastic.

"Marcus Mezzerow?" he asked, glancing at the older man and back at the passport. His lips quivered with amusement at what was printed there. "There seems to be a mistake in the name of the planet," he said. "It's hard to believe they'd call it Messy Row."

"There is a mistake," said Marcus heavily. "However, there's nothing you can do about it. It's listed as Messy Row on the charts."

The official's face twitched and he bent over the other passport. He was slow in stamping it. "Wilbur Mezzrow?" he asked the young man.

"That's me," said Wilbur. "Isn't it a terrible thing to do? You'd almost think people on Earth can't spell—or maybe they don't listen. That's why Pa and me are here."

"Wilbur, this man is not responsible for our misfortune," said Marcus. "Neither can he correct it. Don't bore him with our problems."

"Well, sure."

"Come on."

"Welcome to Earth," said the official as they walked away. He caught sight of a woman coming toward him and cringed inwardly before he recognized that she, too, had just arrived from one of the outer worlds. He could tell because of the absence of the identifying gleam in her eyes. On principle he'd stamp her passport with dull and dingy ink.

Wilbur scuffled along beside his father. He hadn't attained his full growth, but he was as tall though not as heavy as Marcus. "Where are we going now?" he asked. "Get the name changed?"

"Don't gawk," said Marcus, restraining his own tendency to gaze around in bewilderment. Things had changed since his father had been here. "No, we're not. It's simple, but it may take longer than we think. We have to act as if Earth is an unfriendly planet."

"Hardly seems like a planet."

"It is. If you scratch deep enough under those buildings, you'll find soil and rock." Even Marcus didn't know how deep that scratch would have to be.

"Seems hard to believe it was once like—uh—Mezzerow." Wilbur was looking at the buildings and pedestrians streaming past and the little flutter cars that filled the air. "Bet you can't find any place to be alone in."

"More people are alone within ten miles of us than you have ever seen," said Marcus. He stopped in front of a building and consulted a small notebook. The address agreed, but he looked in vain for a name. There wasn't a name on any of the buildings. Nevertheless, this ought to be it. They'd been walking for miles and he had checked all the streets. He spoke to Wilbur and they went inside.

It was a hotel. The Universe over, there is no mistaking a hotel for anything else.

Continuous arrivals and departures stamp it with peculiar impermanency. A person might stay twenty years and yet seem as transient as the man still signing the registry.

A clerk sauntered over to the Mezzerows. He was plump, but the shoulders of his jacket were obviously much broader than he was. "Looking for someone?" he inquired.

"I'm looking for the Outer Hotel," said Marcus.

"This is a hotel," the clerk said, raising his shoulders and letting them fall. One shoulder didn't come down, so he grasped the bottom of the sleeve and pulled it down.

"What's the name?"

The clerk yawned. "Doesn't have a name—just a number. No hotel has had a name for the last hundred years. Too many of them."

"My father stayed at the Outer Hotel fifty years ago, before he left to discover a new planet. It was at this address."

The clerk, wary of his shoulder pads, shrugged sideways. It gave him a bent look when one shoulder stayed back. "Maybe it wasn't a hundred years ago," he said to his fingernails. "Anyway, they don't have names now."

"This must be the old Outer Hotel," Marcus decided. "We'll stay here."

The clerk's aplomb was not as foolproof as he imagined. It slipped a trifle. "You want to stay here? I mean *really*?"

"Why not?" growled Marcus. "You have room, don't you? It seems like a decent place. I don't have any other recommendations."

"Certainly it's decent and we have room. I thought you might be more comfortable elsewhere. I can recommend an exclusive men's hotel to you."

"We are plain people and don't want anything exclusive," said Marcus. "Register us, please."

"I don't do menial tasks," said the clerk with an offended laugh. "I'm here for the sole purpose of imparting class to the hotel. Take your registry problems to the desk robot."

Wilbur looked curiously at the pudgy clerk as he walked away, smiling coyly at the passersby. "Pa, how can a man like him make this place seem classy?"

"Son, I don't know," said Marcus heavily. "Earth has changed since your grandfather described it to me. I don't propose to find out what's the matter with it. We'll just take care of our business and go home."

They signed at the desk, giving their baggage claim checks to the robot, who assured them that everything would be zipped straight to their room from the spaceport.

In spite of Wilbur's protests that he wasn't tired, that he was just getting used to walking again after being cramped in the ship, they went to their rooms to freshen up. Thus they missed the noontime exodus of workers from the buildings around them.

Marcus had food sent up, but didn't eat much, though initially he had been hungry. The lot 219 steaks were excellent in appearance, nicely seared and thick.

Inside, they were gray and watery, with an offensive taste, obviously tank-grown. After a few bites, Marcus abandoned the meat and ate vegetables. These, though ill-flavored and artificially colored, he could eat without suspicion.

Wilbur consumed everything before him, ending by looking hungrily at the steak on his father's plate. Marcus hastily shoved the trays in the disposer slot. If he had time before he left Earth, he meant to find out what a "lot 219" steak was.

He hoped it wasn't what he thought.

When they were ready, they dropped to the ground floor. The clerk who gave class to the hotel was nowhere in sight. They went out into the street and headed for the tall spire of Information Center. It was a landmark they couldn't miss.

Every human who thought of visiting Earth was familiar with it. If a question couldn't be answered there, it was beyond the scope of human knowledge.

There were many more women than men on the streets. Marcus noted it, but didn't think it unusual. He had heard that women had more free time in the middle of the day on planets that had been settled for a long time. He walked on with a long stride, oblivious to the feminine glances he and his son attracted.

At Information Center, he consulted the index at the entrance, jostled by people from thousands of planets who were doing the same. The

red line on the floor led to the planet section, which was what he wanted. Keeping check on Wilbur, who showed a tendency to wander, he followed it to the end.

The end was an immense room with innumerable small booths. Instinctively, Marcus distrusted booths; more than anything else, they resembled vertical coffins. Growling to Wilbur to stay close by, he went inside and closed the door.

He inserted a coin and made the selection.

A harried face appeared on the viewplate. "Does your question require a human answer?"

"It certainly does," said Marcus. "I didn't come nine hundred and forty-seven light-years to be befuddled by a robot."

The harried face barked something unintelligible in another direction and then turned back to Marcus. "Very well. Question?"

"I want to request a change. My planet—"

"Planet? Change?" repeated the face. It disappeared and a finger took its place.

The finger rifled rapidly down a vertical index. It stopped and stabbed and the index popped open. "Go to building P-CAF." The finger snatched a slip out of the open space and dropped the slip in a slot. "Go to the platform at the rear of this building. Take any tube with P-CAF on it. Apply at that building for the change."

Marcus wasn't surprised, but he felt annoyed. "Can't you make the change here?"

"I don't like being shoved around."

"We are not authorized to make changes. We are merely what our name implies; we have the information to direct you to the proper

sources. The slip I gave you is a map of the general vicinity of the place you want. You can't get lost."

"You gave me no map," snapped Marcus. The voice didn't answer him, though the finger still waved on the viewplate. He couldn't argue very well with a finger.

The plate burped and a slip dropped out of the slot below it. Only then did he release the lever, allowing the finger to vanish.

Marcus studied the map. P-CAF (Planets; changes, apply for) was between M-AVO (Marriages; alternate variations of) and M-AAD (Marriages; annulment and divorce).

Hastily, he stuffed the map in his pocket as Wilbur pressed the door, trying to look at what he had in his hand. It was nothing for a growing boy to see.

It wasn't a good map, since it didn't show where the building was in relation to the rest of the city. The transportation tube would take him there, but he'd have to find his own way back.

The tube that whisked them to P-CAF was occupied mainly by Outers, a circumstance that made the crowded uncomfortable trip more bearable. Marcus didn't talk to the others—their interests were worlds apart—but he felt closer to them than to the strange, frantic people of Earth.

P-CAF was neo-drive-in classical, a style once in vogue throughout the Universe. With Wilbur following, Marcus plunged in. It seemed strange that he had come nine hundred odd light-years for a matter that, once stated, would only take a few minutes of some minor official's time. And yet it was necessary. For years, he had been writing requests without results.

It was not as crowded as Information Center. The booths were wider and Marcus decided they both could squeeze in. It was a historic

moment: Wilbur should be present. After several trials, they did get in together.

The official who came to the plate was as relaxed as the other had been harried.

"Planets; changes, apply for," he said. He had perfected the art of raising one eyebrow.

"That's why we're here," said Marcus, fumbling in his jacket. He was jammed against Wilbur and couldn't get his hand in his pocket.

"Land masses reshaped, oceans installed, or climate recycled?" asked the official.

"We don't want the climate changed," said Wilbur. "We've got lots of it—rain, hail, snow, hot weather. All in the same day—though not in the same place. It's a big planet, nearly as big as Earth."

"Wilbur, I'll do the talking," declared Marcus, still struggling to reach his pocket.

"Yes, Pa. But we don't want the continents reshaped. We like them as they are.

And we've got enough oceans."

"Wilbur," Marcus said sharply, pulling his hand free. He held up a tattered chart.

"Are you sure you know what you do want?" asked the relaxed man with a yawn.

"I'm coming to it," said Marcus. "Fifty years ago, my father, Mathew Mezzarow, discovered a planet. Things being the way they were then, planet stealing and such, Captain Mezzarow didn't come back and report it. He settled on it right there, securing for his heirs and descendants a proper share of the new world."

"What do you expect for that, a medal?"

"He could have had a medal. Being practical, he preferred a part of the planet.

Since then, we have become a thriving community. But we're not growing as fast as we should. That's why I'm here."

"You've come to the wrong place," said the man. "P-EHF is what you want."

"Planets; economic help for? No, we don't want that kind of aid. However, there is one insignificant mistake that has been hindering us. People don't settle the way they should. You see, though Captain Mathew Mezzrow didn't return to report his discovery in person, he did send in a routine claim. That's where the mistake was made. Naturally he named the planet after himself. Mezzrow.

Mezz—uh—row. The second e is almost silent, hardly pronounced at all. But what do you think somebody—a robot, probably—called it?"

"I can't guess."

"Messy Row," said Marcus. "It maligns a good man's name. We're stuck with it because somebody bobbled."

"I admit it isn't pretty," said the official with a cautious smile. "But I can't see that it affects anything. One name is as good as another."

"That's what you think," Marcus retorted. "I can see how the robot made the mistake and I'm not blaming it. My father sent in a verbal tape report. Mezzrow could sound a little like Messy Row. Anyway, it's had a bad effect on the settlers.

Men come there because it sounds easy and relaxed, which it is, of course, to a point. But women avoid it. They don't like the sound of the name."

"Then it's really women you're concerned with," said the official. A cold glazed stare had replaced his indifference. "In any event, you've come to the wrong place. We reconstruct planets. Names are out of our jurisdiction."

"It makes things bad when there aren't enough women," continued Marcus.

"Some men leave when they can't find anyone to marry." He crumpled the old chart in his hands. "It's not merely that, of course. Simple justice demands that a great man's name be properly honored."

"You've come to the wrong place for justice," said the official. "P-CAF doesn't make this kind of an adjustment. Let's see if I can't refer you to someone else."

He rested his head on his hand. Then he straightened up, snapping his fingers.

"Of course. If you want the name of a planet changed, you go to Astrogation; charts, errors, locations of."

"You do?" Marcus asked dubiously. Life on Mezzarow had not prepared him for the complexities of governmental organization.

"Certainly," said the official, happy that he had solved the problem. "Don't thank me. It's what I'm here for. Go to A-CELO."

"Where is it?"

The official frowned importantly and turned to the great vertical file that Marcus was learning to associate with all departments of the government. He stabbed his finger at a space, but nothing opened. "Seem to be all out of reference slips," he said with a casual lack of surprise. "Come back tomorrow and I may have some."

It's quitting time now."

"Do I have to come back? A-CELO may be on the other side of the city from here."

"It may be," said the official, reaching for his jacket. "If you don't want to waste time, buy a map from an infolegger. It'll be a day old, but chances are it should be accurate on most things." The plate snapped off, leaving Marcus and his son staring at nothing.

Marcus got up and left the booth. "What's an infolegger?" asked Wilbur as he followed him.

"They move things fast on Earth," said Marcus tiredly. He hadn't realized how wearing it could be to chase down the thread of responsibility in a government that had many things to look after. "An infolegger doesn't know any more about it than you do, but he'll sell you information that you can ordinarily get free from the government."

"But who buys from him?"

"Fools like me who get tired of running around. We'd better get back to the hotel."

"I wish we were on Messy—Mezzerow," said Wilbur wistfully. "Ma would have dinner ready now."

"I keep forgetting your appetite. All right, we'll eat as soon as we find a restaurant."

They found one a block away. It was easy enough to walk there. It was stopping that was hard. Marcus made his way to the side of the street and hauled Wilbur in out of the stream of pedestrians. Inside there was one vacant table which they promptly took, oblivious to the glares of those who were not so fast afoot.

Marcus studied the menu at length. To his disappointment, there was no lot 219

steak listed. Instead there were two other choices, a lot 313 and a miscellany steak. Marcus looked up to see that his son had already dialed his order.

Questioning revealed that Wilbur had missed his afternoon snack and thought that a full portion of one steak and half of the other would compensate for his fast. "Vegetables, too," said Marcus.

"Pa, you know I don't like that stuff."

"Vegetables," said Marcus, watching to make sure his son selected a balanced diet. After deliberation, he decided on a high protein vegetable plate for himself, though ordinarily he liked meat. He couldn't get that idea out of his mind.

The low rectangular serving robot scurried up and began dispensing food with a flurry of extensibles. Marcus noted that the steaks were identical with those served in the hotel. "Waiter, what is the origin of those steaks?"

"The same as all meat. Hygienically grown in a bath of nutrients that supply all the necessary food elements. Trimmed daily and delivered fresh and tender, ready for instant preparation."

"I'm familiar with the process," snapped Marcus, wincing as his son chewed the gray, watery substance. "What I asked was the origin, the ultimate origin. From what animals were the first cells taken?"

"I don't know. No other protein source is so free from contamination."

"Will the manager know?"

"Perhaps."

"Tell him I would like to see him."

"I'll pass the request along. But it won't do any good. The manager can't come."

It's a robot attached to the building."

"Then I'll go to it," said Marcus, rising. "Keep the food warm. How do I get there?"

"The manager shouldn't be disturbed," said the robot as it placed thermoshields over the food. "It's the small room to the rear, at the right of the kitchen."

Marcus found the place without difficulty. The manager lighted up as he came in. The opposite wall blinked and a chair swung out for him. "Complaint?" said the manager hollowly. The manager was hollow.

"Not exactly," said Marcus, repeating his request.

The manager meditated briefly.

"Are you an Outer?"

"I am."

"I thought so. Only Outers ask that question. I'll have to find out some day."

"Make it today," said Marcus.

"An excellent thought," said the manager. "I'll do it. But this is a chain restaurant and so you'll have to wait. If you don't mind the delay, I'll plug in one of our remote information banks."

Marcus did mind delay, but it was worse not knowing. He waited.

"I have it," said the robot after an interval. "There is great difficulty feeding a

city this large. In fact, there is with all of Earth—it's greatly overpopulated."

"So I understand," mumbled Marcus.

"The trouble began forty-five or fifty years ago with the water supply," said the robot. "It was sanitary, but there was too great or not great enough concentration of minerals in it. Information isn't specific on this point. The robots in control of the tanks found that beef, pork, lamb and chicken in all their variety would not grow fast enough. Many tanks wouldn't grow at all.

"The robots communicated this fact to higher authorities and were told to find out how to correct the situation. They investigated and determined that either the entire water-system would have to be overhauled, or a new and hardier protein would have to be developed. Naturally, it would require incalculable labor to install a new water-system. They didn't recommend it."

"Naturally," said Marcus.

"The situation was critical. The city had to be fed. The tank robots were told to find the new protein. Resources were thrown open to them that weren't hither-to available. In a short time, they solved the problem. About half of the tanks that were not growing properly were cleaned out and the new protein placed in them.

The old animal name system was outmoded so the new lot number system was devised and applied to every tank regardless of its ultimate origin."

"Then nobody has any idea what they're eating," said Marcus. "But what was that new protein? That's what I want to know."

"It was hardy. It came from the most adaptable creature on Earth," said the robot.

"And there was another factor in favor of it. The flesh of all mammals is nearly the same. But there are differences. The ideal protein for a meat-eating animal is one which exactly matches the creature's own body, eliminating food that can't be fully utilized."

Marcus closed his eyes and grasped the arm of the chair.

"Do you feel ill?" inquired the managing robot. "Shall I call the doctor? No?"

Well, as I was saying, there was already a supply of animal tissue on hand. It was this that the robots used. It's funny that you're asking this. Not many people are so curious."

"They didn't care," snarled Marcus. "As long as they were fed, they didn't ask

what it was."

"Why should they?" asked the robot. "The tissue was already well adapted to growth tanks. Scrupulously aseptic, in no way did it harm the original donors who were long since dead. And there was little difference in the use of it, anyway. No one would hesitate if he were injured and needed skin or part of a liver or a new eye. This was replacement from the inside, by a digestive process rather than a medical one."

"The robots took tissue from the surgery replacement tanks," said Marcus. "Do you deny it?"

"That's what I've been telling you," said the robot. "A very clever solution considering how little time they had. However only about half of the tanks had to be replaced."

"Cannibals," said Marcus, nearly destroying the chair as he hurled it away from him.

"What's a cannibal?" asked the robot.

But Marcus wasn't there to answer. He went back to the restaurant, under control by the time he reached the table. He couldn't tell Wilbur because Wilbur had finished eating except for the vegetables which were mostly untouched. Marcus sat down and took the shields off the food, looking at it gloomily.

"Pa, aren't you going to eat?" asked Wilbur.

"As soon as I get my breath back," he said. It wasn't bad when he ate, but the mere thought of food was distasteful. He glanced sternly at his son. "Wilbur, hereafter you may not order meat. As long as we are on Earth, you will ask for eggs."

"Just eggs?" said Wilbur incredulously. "Gee, they're real expensive here.

Anyway, I don't like them without a rasher of—"

"Eggs," said Marcus. Another thought occurred to him. "Sunny-side up. No cook can disguise that."

The sky was dark when they left the restaurant. After work, traffic had abated and the entertainment rush hadn't come on the streets, which were now curiously silent and deserted. Marcus caught sight of the tall spire of Information Center glistening against the evening sky.

"Where are we going?" asked Wilbur.

"To the hotel. We have a hard day's work tomorrow."

"Can we walk? I mean, we can't see anything in the tubes."

"It's a long walk."

"It's right over there. I've walked farther before breakfast."

Marcus noted with approval that Wilbur had used the Information Center as a landmark to deduce the correct location of the hotel. His training showed. Even in the confusion of the city, he wouldn't get lost. "It's farther than you think, but we'll walk if you want. It may be our last evening on Earth. At least, I sincerely hope so."

They went on. In time they saw what there was to see. It was a city, vast and sprawling, but still just another city Man had created. The

buildings were huge, but constructed as all buildings had to be, out of stone and steel, concrete and plastic. Women were beautiful, tastefully gowned and coiffured, but it was easy to see that they were merely women. Shops were elaborate and fanciful, but there was a limit to what they displayed, an end to the free play of fancy.

By the time they realized they were tired, they were close to the hotel. There wasn't any use in seeking transportation, since they'd get where they were going almost as fast either way. They had kept to the main thoroughfares since there was more to see. But Marcus had quickly accustomed himself to the pattern of streets and as they neared their destination he saw a short cut which they took.

It was getting late and the street was dark. He began to wonder whether they should have come this way. He decided they shouldn't have. A faint red flash from the doorway indicated that his tardy decision was sound but useless. His knees tingled where the red flash struck him and in the middle of a stride he felt he didn't have any feet. He fell forward, trying to shield Wilbur. Wilbur was falling, too, and they collided on the downward arc.

Hands seized him, lifting him up. He was in no condition to struggle. Besides it

wasn't safe. A tingler wasn't a lethal weapon, but it could have unpleasant effects if used carelessly or hastily. He didn't think they were in any real danger and it was best not to provoke their captors.

By the time he had recovered sufficiently to be aware of what was going on, he found he had been carried to a space between two buildings, hidden from the street by a masonry projection. Wilbur was sitting beside him and a dim light played on them.

"Don't move," said a voice that made an effort to be rough and hard, but failed by an octave. Now that Marcus thought of it the hands that had lifted him were small and soft. Their captors were women. The disconnected impressions of the city seemed to fall into a pattern. He was not greatly surprised at what was happening.

The light moved closer and Marcus could make out the figure of the woman who held it. Behind her were others—all women. But even delicate hands were capable of leveling a tingler. "Don't say anything," he said to his son in a low voice. Wilbur nodded dazedly.

"No whispering," barked the soprano, shining the light directly in his eyes.

"Now, are either of you married?"

Marcus sighed; so that was it. Poor Earth was in a bad way when a pudgy unattractive clerk could get a high-salaried job solely because he was male.

"Answer me," demanded the high unsteady voice. "Are either of you married?"

"On Earth, I mean."

Marcus could see her clearly, now that his eyes had become accustomed to the light. She was young, barely out of her teens.

"What kind of question is that? When you're married, you're married. It doesn't matter where you are." On Earth, apparently, it did.

"Outers," she exclaimed happily. "I've always hoped I'd find one. They're real men. Now let's see, which one shall I take?" She flashed the light on Wilbur, who squirmed and blinked.

"He's younger and will probably last longer," she said critically. "On the other hand, he'll be clumsy and inexperienced."

She turned to Marcus. "You need a shave," she said crisply. "Your beard is turning gray. I think I'll take you. Older men are nice."

"You can't have me," said Marcus. She was near and he could have taken both the weapon and the light from her. But he couldn't stand, much less walk, and there were other women in the background, all

armed probably, watching the girl who seemed to be their leader.
"You see, I am married. Wilma wouldn't like it, if I took another wife."

"Not even just for the time you're on Earth? It isn't much to ask." She turned the light on herself. "Am I unattractive?"

She was not outstandingly beautiful, but since she was dressed as scantily as law allowed and fashion decreed Marcus could see her desirability. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Old enough," she said. "In eleven months, I'll be twenty-one."

"You're pretty," said Marcus. "If I were fifteen or twenty years younger—and not married—I'd come courting."

"But you did," she said in amazement. "Why did you come down a dark street, if you weren't looking for romance?"

This, it seemed, is what passed for romance on Earth. Men must be outnumbered at least three to one. It tied in with what he had so far observed. "I'm sorry for your trouble," he said.

"But you must remember that we're Outers. We're not familiar with your customs. We were merely taking a short cut to our hotel."

She gestured in sullen defeat. "I suppose it was a mistake. But why can't I have him, then? He's not married."

"He isn't, nor will he be for some time. He has barely turned seventeen. I won't give my permission."

"He's your son? Then you are experienced. Are you sure you won't reconsider me—just while you're on Earth? I told you I don't like young men. Maybe that's because my father was an older man."

"I'm sure he was," said Marcus. "However that's no reason to find me irresistible." He tried to stand, but his legs were rubbery and he sat down quickly.

She looked at him with concern. "Does it hurt? I guess we gave you the strongest charge." She handed him the light and went to the women who were standing some distance behind her. He heard her whispering. Presently she came back.

She knelt beside him and began rubbing his legs. "I sent them away," she said.

"They're going to look for someone else. It was my turn to propose to whomever we captured, but now you spoiled it."

He smiled at her earnestness. "I'm sure you deserve better than you're apt to find with these strange methods of courtship. However I think you should help my son. You gave him a charge, too."

"I bet I did," she said scornfully. "Don't worry about him. Kids recover easily."

"Should I clout her, Pa?" asked Wilbur as he stood up, bending his knees gingerly. "She had no business shooting us."

"She didn't, but you have no business talking like that. Touch her and I'll wallop you."

The girl ignored Wilbur, putting her arms around Marcus and helping him to his feet. From the girl's reaction to him you'd never think so, but he was getting old.

The first step was proof of it. He could walk unaided, but it felt as if someone were pulling pins out of his legs at the rate of two or three a second.

"I'll go with you to the hotel," said the girl. "There are probably other marriage gangs out. If they see me with you, they'll think I've already made my catch."

Marcus frowned in the darkness. Wilbur was getting entirely the wrong idea about women. He'd find it difficult to adjust to the different

conditions at home.

Marcus told the girl their names and asked hers.

"Mary Ellen."

"That's all, Mary Ellen?"

"Of course, I have a last name, but I'm hoping to change it."

He sighed in resignation. "Mary Ellen, we won't discuss marriage again. Is this clear? However I have plans for you. I'll get in touch with you before we leave Earth." They were nearing a brightly lit thoroughfare and he felt safer.

"I was hoping you'd say that," she said wistfully. She dug into a tiny purse and handed him a card. "You'll notice there's another name on it, too. That's Chloe, my half-sister. She's smart and I like her, but I hope you don't like her—not better than me, anyway."

"I'm sure I won't. But why half-sister? I'd think it would be rather difficult for your mother to marry again."

"Of course she couldn't," she said scornfully. "No woman's allowed more than half a—"

"Mary Ellen!"

"All right, I won't say it," she said crossly. "But you asked."

He could fill in the missing information. With women drastically outnumbering men, husbands had to be shared. Men were allowed more than one mate, but women never were. Perhaps the development of polygamy had been inevitable.

Earth was the center of a vast and spreading civilization. Men went out to settle the newly discovered planets while, for the most part, women tended to remain behind. More than that, there were some women who came to Earth from planets that had been settled longer,

attracted by the glamor of an older civilization and high-paying jobs, never realizing until they got there the other conditions that went with it.

Earth's dilemma was therefore a partial solution to one of the problems of his own planet. But the important problem, getting the name changed to Mezzrow, was harder than he had anticipated. He wasn't looking forward to tomorrow.

He noticed Mary Ellen glancing curiously around. "Is there anything wrong?" he asked.

"Nooo. It's just sort of funny that you'd stay here—in the heart of the unmarried girls' residential district." She grinned at him. "Maybe I'd better go in with you."

"I think you'd better," he said. That's what the pudgy clerk had meant. He should have listened to him and gone to the men's hotel.

The lobby was crowded with women, many of whom, he suspected, had been waiting for their return. On a man-starved planet, word got around. Perhaps he was imagining it, but he thought he heard an audible sigh of disappointment when they came in with Mary Ellen. She had more than repaid them for the few anxious moments she had caused. Much more, though she didn't know it yet.

They went directly to their rooms and Marcus sent Wilbur inside, lingering at the door to talk with the girl. "Should I come in?" she asked hopefully. "I'm really sorry about your legs."

"You will not come in, Mary Ellen. I don't trust myself alone with you."

"You mean it?"

"I was never more sincere." He almost believed it himself.

"We don't *have* to get married if you're not going to be here long enough to make it worthwhile," she said happily. "I was thinking—"

He glanced warningly inside the room.

"He's a big nuisance," she whispered. "Look. I've got to work tomorrow, but in the evening I'll be free. Put the kid on a merry-go-round and come and see me, huh?" She threw her arms around Marcus and kissed him passionately. Then she turned and ran down the hall.

Marcus shook his head and went into his room.

In the morning, Marcus had little difficulty contacting an infolegger. For a rather large sum, a map purporting to show the location of A-CELO exchanged hands.

For another sum, a map of the principal transportation tubes was added to it.

Both were assuredly out of date in many respects, but were probably correct in the one detail Marcus was concerned with.

They started rather late to avoid the morning rush. There were some transportation complications. At the first trial they arrived at the wrong section of the city. After consultation with various passengers and robot way stations, they got it straightened out. Penciling corrections on the map, they retraced their route, making only one mistake along the way. This mistake was not their fault.

A transfer junction had been relocated since they had passed through it on the way out.

They got to their destination in good time, perhaps faster than if they had used the services of Information Center. A-CELO was also an example of neo-drive-in classical. But instead of resembling something appropriate, say a five or six pointed star, it appeared to be a mere jumble of children's curv-blocks. A closer look convinced Marcus that his first appraisal had been wrong. Originally it must have been built to house another A-function. Perhaps A-WR (Anatomy; woman, reclining).

Whatever it was on the outside, A-CELO was confusion within. Marcus found it impossible to get near the question booths. Robots scurried about in seemingly useless tasks and workmen shouted orders that no one paid attention to. In the midst of the dust and turmoil, one man stood on a platform and watched the frantic effort with bored serenity.

"Moving," he said automatically as Marcus approached.

"Where to?"

"I don't know. It depends on whom we can bump."

Marcus paled visibly. They were moving and didn't know where. Another day and his map was useless. And if this man was right, even Information Center wouldn't know where A-CELO was tomorrow. "Isn't there a planning commission?" he said. "Don't they tell you where to move?"

The man shrugged. "There's a planning commission. But they had too many responsibilities and had to move to a larger building, the same as we're doing.

Until they get settled, everyone's on his own." The man spoke quietly into the mike and the tempo of the removal robots accelerated. He turned back to Marcus and added an explanation: "Three exploration ships returned yesterday, loaded to the brim with micro-data. That's why we have to move."

Marcus rubbed his face. He could see it posed a problem. It was not merely the storage of new data, the data also had to be made available to the public. This required new offices, human supervisors, robot clerks.

That was the way they did things on Earth, but he wished they'd waited a few days. "You can't be moving this stuff out on the streets. Somebody must have an idea where you're going. Tell me who he is. I've got to find out where you'll be tomorrow."

"Oh, no. If you found where we're moving, you'd learn who we're going to bump," said the man with cheerful cunning. "They'd take steps to repel us. Can't have that." The man scratched his head. "Tell you, if you're really honest—if you're not a department spy—I can show you how to take care of your business today."

"I'm an Outer," said Marcus. "I don't care about your squabbles. I want to get something settled and get out of here."

"You look like an Outer," said the man. "Here's what you do. Part of the department is still functioning. Go to the side entrance. Question booths there are open." He turned back to the mike and barked orders that had no visible effect on anything.

The man was partly wrong. The side entrance was open, but corridors and booths were jammed with displaced information seekers. Marcus was not easily discouraged. By now he was accustomed to the vast machinations required for the simplest things. He went to the back entrance. It, too, was jammed, but after a short desperate struggle he squeezed into a booth, leaving Wilbur to hang on the outside.

The official who answered him was sleepy and harassed, a difficult expression.

He yawned and took his feet off the desk to acknowledge the call and then a robot removed the desk. He had no place to put his feet so he kept them firmly on the floor as if he expected that, too, to vanish.

Marcus stated the request clearly, spreading the chart for the man to see. "Here is

the original from which the photo-tape was made and sent to Earth with his comments. I don't know what happened here. Perhaps the tape was fuzzy or it may have been fogged in transit by radiation. Or it may have been faulty interpretation on the part of a robot."

The official peered out of the view plate. "Messy Row. Mezzrow. Ha, ha." He laughed perfunctorily and got up to pace. A robot came near the chair and he sat down hastily.

"Here, you can see that in his own hand he spelled it Mezzrow," said Marcus.

"He named it after himself as every explorer is entitled to do once in his career. I ask that in simple justice the mistake be corrected. I have a petition signed by everyone on the planet."

The official waved the documents back. "It doesn't matter who signed," he said.

"We don't allow these things to influence our decision." He put his head in his hand though he had no desk for his elbow. His lips moved soundlessly as he framed the reply.

"I want to give you an insight to our problems," he said. "First, consider pilots.

There are all sorts of beautiful names for planets. Plum Branch, Coarsegold, Waves End, but there's only one Messy Row. It's a bright spot on their voyage.

They look at the charts and see it—Messy Row. They laugh. Laughter is a therapeutic force against the loneliness of space. The name of your planet is distinctive."

"We don't care for the distinction," said Marcus. "It's got so bad, we call it Messy Row ourselves, when we're not thinking. Who's going to settle on a planet they laugh at?" The official didn't seem to hear. Marcus adjusted the volume control, but there didn't seem to be anything wrong with the sound or the volume.

"This is only a small part of it," continued the man. "Do you have any idea how many charts we print? You would have us make them

obsolete. Think of the ships roaming through space, many never touching Earth. How can we reach them with corrected charts?"

"I'm glad you said corrected charts," said Marcus. "But corrected charts shouldn't be any harder to deliver than new ones—which, you'll admit, you're always making."

"I can't compromise our famous accuracy for the whims of a few selfish

individuals," said the official. He stood up and this time the robot whisked the chair away. He smiled and reached out his hand for the familiar vertical file. The file wasn't there, but a robot was. It took his hand and tried to lead him away. He shook himself loose. "You can see we're busy. Come back when we're not in the midst of an upheaval. I might consider a request that at present I must turn down." He walked briskly away, leaving Marcus with a fine view of an empty room—until a robot came and took the viewplate to the other end.

Marcus eased out of the booth. Wilbur was waiting with an anxious face. "I know it's past noon," he said gloomily to his son. "We'll get something to eat.

Eggs." Wilbur knew better than to protest.

They left A-CELO before the removal robots arrived at the rear section. In the quiet of a nearby restaurant Marcus considered the problem anew. The mission hadn't been entirely a failure. He could accomplish one important task without the aid of any government agency. In fact, it was better if he didn't ask their help.

But he owed something to the memory of Captain Mathew Mezzarow.

Mezzarow his father had called the planet—and Mezzarow it was going to be.

There was also Wilma. She had arrived when both she and the settlement were quite young. Courted and feted and proposed to endlessly, she had found the excitement of being the center of attention irresistible. She hadn't minded the name then, not since she was the prettiest, most attractive girl there. There weren't many others.

But she had changed as Messy Row had grown. They had four sons now, Wilbur the oldest. Four sons. She was not concerned whether they would marry. Her sons were smart and handsome and belonged to the best family—they would experience no trouble in finding wives. But if they did she could always take them visiting—to a planet on which there was no woman shortage.

Once she had been slightly giddy, even after they were married. Marcus had often wondered how her lashes could possibly remain intact when other men came near. She had outgrown that phase and when the chrysalis burst it revealed a different woman.

Out of the flirtatious girl came the homemaker. Everything near her was

immaculate. Fences around the house were whitewashed and the lawns were always mowed. Inside, everything was as tidy as a pin. Mud was never tracked in. Wilma no longer approved of Messy Row as the name of any planet on which she lived.

Marcus had to have help. Someone who lived on Earth would know the proper approach better than he. He fished out the card Mary Ellen had given him and the longer he looked the more certain he was that he had found the person. It was not Mary Ellen. It was her sister.

Mary Ellen and Chloe—no last names given. Apparently this was custom, the way unmarried girls informed the world that they were looking for mates. In addition to their names was the address at which they both lived.

There was also the occupation of each. Mary Ellen was a junior attendant, whatever that was. But Chloe was far more important. She was an astrographer, a senior supervisor astrographer.

Marcus ate rapidly, a definite plan materializing with each bite. Chloe was the key. With her aid, he should be able to change Messy Row. He smiled reflectively. With what he had to offer she would certainly consent to help him— even if it was illegal.

Mary Ellen was not at home, but Chloe was and she welcomed them. Marcus truthfully explained how they'd met her sister. Chloe commented unfavorably on the marriage gangs and, though Marcus agreed, he received the remarks in silence. It was not for him to change the mores of Earth. Society had to work with what there was.

Chloe was small and dark in contrast to the larger blonde Mary Ellen. She was older, too. Once she must have been quite pretty, but instead of easing graciously into the poise of maturity she had been forced into the early thirties without a husband. The struggle showed.

She was cordial when they came in and even more cordial when he finished outlining his plan. "Yes, something can be done," she said quietly. "I will set up the organization and ship them out in groups of ten. I have a vacation in a few months and Mary Ellen and I will come then." She glanced at him anxiously.

"That is, if you think I'm needed."

"You are," he assured her. "We need wives, mothers, skilled technicians. I can't think of anyone who will fit the description better."

"Then you'll see me again," she said. "And not merely for the reasons you think."

You see, I have a high-salaried job and could have been married before this. But it didn't seem right. I want to feel I'm of some use to a civilization that seems to have forgotten people like me exist."

"Mezzerow needs you," he said. "I was thinking of a man I know. Joe Ainsworth, a quiet thoughtful fellow of about thirty-five or thirty-seven. His trouble has been that he likes pretty women who are also intelligent. I'll have him keep an eye out for you."

She smiled and the transformation took place. She *was* pretty. Marcus wondered whether there was such a person as Joe Ainsworth. There must be, in kind if not in name.

"So much for that," said Chloe briskly. "The rest of your plan for Messy Row is a fine example of muddy thinking. In the first place I work for a private company, not the government."

"But you make government charts."

"True. But let me show you what I mean. What's the code number of the chart Messy Row is on?"

Marcus quoted it from memory. The code of a map on which a given system could be found was almost as important as the name.

Chloe closed her eyes. "No," she said when she opened them. "That's done in another department. I couldn't possibly change it to Mezzerow."

"But if you changed it, the name would stay," said Marcus. "I'll give you money to see that it gets done. Once it's on the map nobody will say anything. Even if they do notice, all they'll know is that there's a conflict between early and late editions. They'll have to go directly to the source to straighten it out. And we're the source."

Chloe smiled fleetingly. "It's never done that way. Do you think they'd send nine hundred and forty-seven light-years to find whether the name is Messy Row or Mezzerow?" She crossed her legs and they were nice legs. There had to be a Joe Ainsworth.

"It won't work," said Chloe. "I can't make the change myself or even bribe someone to do it." She noticed his dejection and touched his

hand. "Don't be discouraged. There's another way. An Outer wouldn't think of it because he doesn't know what goes on behind the scenes."

"I've seen enough to give me a good idea," said Marcus.

"I wonder. Have you noticed that when you ask for information you are always answered by a human? And just as obviously he doesn't know. He has to contact a robot and relay the information along."

He hadn't thought of it. The omnipresent vertical file was, in reality, a robot memory bank. Why not give the robot a voice and dispense with innumerable men and women? The question was on his face when he looked at Chloe.

"Robots are logical—nothing more," she said. "Most questions can't be given black and white answers. There must be an intermediary who understands the limitations of the mechanical mind to interpret it to the public."

"I don't see how this is going to help me," he said.

"You've been trying to get an official to say that you're right and he'll see that the change is made. Abandon that approach. He'll never take the time. Write your request."

"For forty years we've been writing. That's why I'm here."

Chloe smiled again. "The number of letters received by the government in one year reaches a remarkable total. Or perhaps the total isn't huge when you consider how many humans in the Universe there are. Anyway, off-planet letters are never opened, because there's no way to tell from the outside which are important. So they're all pulped and used as nutrients in food tanks."

Marcus nodded dubiously. "I see. Anyone who thinks he has something important will come here ... as I did. And if he isn't satisfied he tries to go over the head of whoever refused the request."

This volume is still great, but it's small enough to be processed without falling hopelessly behind."

"Exactly. And if you phrase your request properly there's a good chance it will be granted, even if it is foolish."

"This isn't foolish," said Marcus, rubbing his hands. "I've got all the facts. I can write them in my sleep."

"Who said anything about facts?" said Chloe. "The worst thing you can do is to give them facts. Don't you see what I'm trying to tell you?"

Marcus took a deep breath. "No," he said.

"Let's go over it again. Mathew Mezzrow discovered a planet and named it after himself. Does this mean anything? Not really. Does it mean anything that Messy Row will be settled more slowly because of the name? Again no.

Thousands of other planets will gain the settlers that Messy Row loses. The robot will refuse a request based on facts and from the government's viewpoint will be justified."

"But you just said robots don't handle requests."

"Face to face they don't. You would resent it as an arrogant bureaucracy being told you couldn't have something by a robot. But you don't see who processes written requests. And in these matters the government uses robots because they're more efficient."

It was too complex for Marcus. Robots processed written requests, but not those made in person. Robots were logical and only logical and therefore ordinarily should not be appealed to on the basis of reason.

He swallowed hard and looked at Chloe. "What should I do?" he asked.

"Emotion," she said. "Robots don't understand emotion. But they can and have been built to recognize emotion. On a minor matter such as this, you need to overload the emotion recognition factor.

"Merely identify the planet. Then stress not the justice of your claim but the anguish you've suffered. Make it extreme—paint a picture of the misery the error has already caused and will continue to cause. If you make it strong enough, the robot will set aside rational processes and grant the request."

It began to be clear. As the government grew in size and complexity and contact with the governed parts became more tenuous, greater reliance had to be placed in logic, machine-made logic. But machines could not hope to encompass all the irrationality of Man. And irrational demands were apt to cause trouble. Pride was irrational, and so was the greater part of human misery.

Therefore, in minor matters, the government had provided a safety valve for irrational requests. Only in minor matters, men still decided important issues.

But in the innumerable small decisions that had to be made daily, robots would set aside their logical process if a strong emotion were present.

"Pa," said Wilbur from the corner in which he had been squirming sleepily.

"Not now, Wilbur," growled Marcus. "I suppose you're hungry." In his mind he was composing the request. It was unlike anything he'd written.

"I think there's something in the kitchen," said Chloe, but Marcus hastily refused. Even on her salary she couldn't afford to serve eggs.

Mary Ellen came in just then. She slouched in dispiritedly, cloak drooping about her. "Hi, sis," she said as she opened the door.

Then she saw Marcus and revived abruptly. She flung herself across the room and into his lap, wrapping her arms around him. "Mark, dear," she said, smiling cattily over his head at her sister.

Marcus sighed regretfully. Heaven knew what the boy in his innocence would tell his mother. He worked himself loose from the girl's embrace and explained why he was here.

"Then we're going to Messy Row?"

"In a few months," said Chloe. "Marcus is setting up a perpetual fund to help those who can't pay their fare."

"Oh, I'll go," said Mary Ellen, looking steadily at Marcus. "But you needn't expect me to get married."

Marcus smiled to himself. She was dramatizing. When she found her choice wasn't limited she would scarcely remember him. There was, if Marcus now recalled correctly, a Joe Ainsworth, twenty-four or five. What made him seem older, when Marcus had first thought of him, was his prematurely gray hair. The two should be a perfect match. Chloe could not have Joe Ainsworth after all, but there'd be another for her.

"Please change, Mary Ellen," said Marcus. "We're going to dinner."

"All of us?"

"Certainly all of us," said Marcus dryly, noting her disapproval.

As she left he began discussing with Chloe what he should say in the request.

Apparently there were nuances he didn't understand because he still didn't have it settled to his satisfaction when Mary Ellen returned.

"I'm ready," she said, pirouetting for his approval.

She was ready, but not for a quiet little dinner. "I suggest a wrap for your shoulders," he said. She made a face, but went to get one.

"How long will it take to get this through?" he asked Chloe.

"Four to six *years*. There's a backlog."

"Four to six *years*?" he repeated incredulously? He began to see that the loophole the government had provided was very small indeed. Who would bother, even if he felt strongly about it, when he knew it would take so long?

"That's going through regular channels." Chloe frowned and smoothed her hair.

"You may be very lucky though. Today, just today, we might find a much faster way. You said they are moving A-CELO?"

"They are," he said, hoping he knew what she meant. This was a golden opportunity that might never come again.

"Then they'll be busy through the night. A workman should have access to the master robot."

Marcus smiled. "I'm an excellent workman."

"You'll need me, too. You won't recognize what you're after."

"Granted. Is it dangerous?"

"Not physically. But there's a severe penalty for tampering with government property. There's an even heavier one for trying to get your case considered ahead of schedule."

He could see why this was so. He could also see that Chloe was the kind of person Messy Row needed. She knew what she was getting into, but didn't hesitate. "Then you should come with me. But stay in the background. Promise me you'll try to get away if I'm caught."

She shrugged. "If you're caught you'll need help on the outside."

Mary Ellen came back, a transparent shimmering wrap over her shoulders. She was blonde and dazzling. "Where are we going? I'm so happy."

Marcus loosened his collar and sat down. "Dinner's off, except for you two."

Chloe and I have work to do. Mary Ellen, take Wilbur back to the hotel for me.

Watch after him."

"You want me to?" she asked despondently.

"I asked you to."

"Then I will." She arched her back, and it was a splendid arch. She swirled around, pausing at the door. "Come on, brat," she snarled.

"Pa, I can get along—" said Wilbur. Marcus looked at him and he left with Mary Ellen.

"We haven't much time," said Marcus when they were alone. "First we have to write the request. I'll need your help."

Chloe took the cover off a small machine in the corner. She sat down and turned toward him. "We have to emphasize anguish and suffering."

"Misery," suggested Marcus.

"Misery is a good strong word," she agreed. "It isn't used much lately. You should have this acted on in hours instead of years."

"It will be nice," said Marcus. "I can't think of any name as bad as Messy Row."

Slowly he began to speak of the misery resulting from the error. Making corrections as they went, Chloe typed it on the tape.

Marcus Mezzrow felt the weight of forty-three years roll away. He was tired, but it was relaxed tiredness that comes with achievement. It had been easy to walk into A-CELO and become part of the bustle and confusion. It had even been easy to locate the master robot that processed decisions on chart names. But the rest hadn't been easy even with Chloe to guide and counsel him.

The master robot was one of the last things to be moved. It was located deep in the sub-sub-basement, ordinarily inaccessible. It was a ponderous contrivance, awkward to move and quite delicate. Truck robots backed up to it and under it, lifting it up. Technicians and extra workmen swiftly began disconnecting it from the building. Marcus was one of those extra workmen and he did his job as well as the others. But he didn't get an opportunity to insert his request in the machine.

Chloe sauntered past in shapeless work clothes, winking as she went by. She attracted no attention because there were many women around. Marcus got ready, moving to the front of the machine, feeling the spool in his pocket. A technician stared suspiciously at him, but there wasn't anything definite to object to.

Chloe leaned against the wall, moving the switch next to her with her elbow.

Immediately standby circuits cut in, but the flicker of lights caused a commotion.

The technician next to Marcus whirled, shouting at Chloe who looked startled and tired. The tiredness was real.

In the few free seconds he had, Marcus put the spool in the machine close to the top. It jammed the remaining spools closer together, but the machine was built to compensate for overloads. There should be no trouble from this.

The spool itself was another thing Chloe had helped him with. Normally requests were received on paper and had to be transcribed. She had enabled him to bypass one stage altogether.

They worked on after the shouting episode. At the first rest break they walked up to the street level, pausing in a dimly lighted hall to strip off their outer work clothing which they disposed of. They were no longer workmen. They were pedestrians who had passed by and wandered in to see what was happening.

They didn't belong in the building and were told to leave, which they did.

And so it was late when Marcus entered the hotel. There was no one around, for which he was thankful. He didn't feel like fending off women at this hour of the morning. He went up and let himself in quietly. Wilbur was asleep in the adjoining room and the door between them was open. He closed it before turning on the light, which he adjusted to the lowest level. Perhaps by this time the master chart robot was in a new location, grinding out decisions. Messy Row was or soon would be a thing of the past.

"Pa," Wilbur called as Marcus removed a shoe.

"Yes. I'm back. Go to sleep."

"Did you get it done?"

"It's finished. We're taking the next ship out."

"Tomorrow?"

"If there's one scheduled tomorrow."

"Before we say good-by?"

Marcus could hear the bed rustle as Wilbur sat up. "We'll send them a note."

Anyway they'll be on Mezzarow in a few months."

The door opened and Wilbur stood there, his face white and his eyes round and serious. "But I gotta say good-bye to Mary Ellen."

Marcus took off the other shoe. He should have known not to leave them alone.

His only excuse was that he had been thinking of other things. "I thought you didn't like her," he said.

"Pa, that was because I thought she didn't like me," said Wilbur. "But she does. I mean—" He leaned heavily against the doorway and his face was long and sad.

Marcus smiled in the near darkness. The boy had been around girls so seldom he didn't know how they behaved. He had mistaken a normal reaction to the opposite sex for something more. Nevertheless it had worked out nicely. Wilbur would not remember who it was that Mary Ellen had really pursued. With the feverish egotism of youth he would retain only the memory of the interest she'd shown in him. A kiss would haunt him for years. "Am I to understand you made love to her?" he asked sternly, amused at his own inaccuracy.

"Oh, Pa," said Wilbur. "I kissed her."

"These affairs pass away."

"I still gotta say good-bye," said Wilbur.

"We'll see," said Marcus. Not if he could help it, would they. It would be a terrible thing if, on parting, Mary Ellen would throw her arms around him, ignoring Wilbur. She was too young to understand what it might mean to someone even younger than herself. Marcus went to sleep with the satisfaction of a man who is in full control of destiny.

In the morning there was no need for subterfuge. A ship was going near Mezzrow. Not directly to it, the planet wasn't that important. But it was merely a short local hop from one of the planets on the schedule. Mezzrow. After all these years he could call it by the rightful name without feeling provincial.

The excitement of the return trip shook Wilbur out of his preoccupation with Mary Ellen. Marcus packed and had the luggage zipped to the space port. He called Chloe and completed the financial arrangements and left a message for her sister who was at work.

And then they were at the port, entering the ship. There was a short wait before takeoff. They settled in the cabin and Wilbur promptly went to sleep. Food, sleep, girls; it was all a young man had time for.

But Marcus couldn't rest though he was tired. He wanted to hear the schedule announced. By this time the correction should have been made. The rockets started, throbbing softly as the tubes warmed up. Wilbur awakened with a start, sitting on the edge of the acceleration diaphragm. "Do you think they'll announce it?" he asked.

"I think so," said Marcus. The Universe would know that it was Mezzrow.

The rockets throbbed higher; the cabin shook. Weren't they going to call the schedule? The intercom in the cabin rasped.

They were. "Bessemer, Coarsegold," said the speaker.

"Get on the acceleration couch," said Marcus as he did so himself.

"Noreen, Cassalmon," the speaker droned. But now there was too much interference from the rockets. The thrust pressed Marcus deep into the flexible diaphragm. The announcer shouted, but the blood was roaring in his ears.

Marcus felt himself sliding into the gray world of takeoff.

Then they were out among the stars and the sensation of great weight rolled away. Marcus sat up.

"We didn't hear it," said Wilbur, swinging his legs.

"We didn't. But they announced it."

"I wish I'd heard," said Wilbur.

It was bothering Marcus, too. "The thing to do is to find out," he said. They went into the corridor. The rockets were silent; the star drive had taken over. The solar system was behind them, indistinguishable from the other stars.

The pilot was busy and nodded his head, asking them to wait while he set the controls. He flipped levers and after an interval turned around. "Can I help you?"

he asked.

"We didn't hear the schedule," said Marcus. "The rockets were too loud."

The pilot smiled apologetically. "You know how it is—last minute corrections on the charts. We had to wait until new ones were delivered, just before takeoff."

The oppression that had been hovering near lifted a little. "I understand," said Marcus. "Would you tell me if Mezzrow was one of the corrections?"

The pilot turned to the list and ran his finger down the line. He looked and looked again. "No Mezzrow here," he said.

The oppression had never been far away. It came back. "No Mezzrow?" said Marcus bleakly.

"No, but I'll check." The pilot bent over the list. "Wait. Maybe this is why I didn't see it. Take a look."

Marcus looked where the pilot was pointing. Above the fingernail, in bold black letters, was the name.

MISERY ROW (Formerly Mezzero—changed to avoid confusion with a

family name.)

"Thanks," said Marcus faintly. "That's what I wanted to know."

They went to the cabin in silence. Marcus closed his eyes but that didn't shut out the new name. Nothing could.

"That's not as nice as it was," said Wilbur. "What do you suppose was wrong?"

"I don't know," said Marcus. But he did know. Fourteen times, or was it eleven, he had used one word. He had tried to overload the master robot with emotion and he had succeeded.

He had given it one outstanding impression: Misery.

"What'll we do?" said Wilbur. "Go back and change it?"

"No," said Marcus. "We'll leave it as it is. When you grow up and take my place, you can try your hand at it if you want."

Women would get there regardless of what it was called. Chloe would realize what had happened and anyway he'd write. She'd see that they got to the right place. And with women for the men who wanted to settle, they'd get along.

Besides, there was the element of uncertainty. He had thought nothing could be quite as bad as the old name ... until this. He shuddered to think what the next change might be like.

"Will it be all right?" asked Wilbur anxiously.

"It has to be all right," said Marcus, his voice strong with resignation.
"We're going home to Misery Row."

End of Project Gutenberg's Mezzrow Loves Company, by Floyd L.
Wallace

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