

A VIEW

The porter took Mr and Mrs Renfrew's bags and showed them to their room in Hotel Mirabel. But as they entered the room Mrs Renfrew's face fell and Mr Renfrew looked distinctly annoyed. The porter put down their bags and asked, "Is something wrong, sir?"

"Like hell there is!" replied Mr Renfrew angrily. "We distinctly asked for a room with a view."

"But, sir, you have a view. Look out of the window."

"But all I can see," said Mrs Renfrew, "is the side of the next hotel to us."

"Yes, ma'am," said the porter. "Your view is of the Majestic."

"What the heck," shouted Mr Renfrew, "are you trying to be funny? When we asked for a room with a view we expected to have a view worth looking at!"

"But sir," replied the porter. "You did not inform us what view you wished to see."

"Give me strength," groaned his wife. "If you come to a hotel on the sea front and ask for a view, you expect a view overlooking the sea. This is no view."

"I am sorry, Mr and Mrs Renfrew. I will find the manager and let him know." With that the porter left the room.

"I'm not unpacking yet," said Mr Renfrew. "I want the manager to find us a different room or else we'll look for a different hotel."

"Oh," groaned his wife. "What decent hotel is likely to have a spare room at this time of the year? We've been five hours getting here, and for most of the time we hardly moved, baking in those ghastly traffic jams. I'm not moving now. Why on earth didn't you make it clear when you booked the hotel that we wanted a room on the front!"

"How was I to know that the hotel people would be so stupid. Anyone with a brain half the size of a gnat would know what a room with a view means!"

At that point there was a knock on the door. When Mr Renfrew answered it, he found it was the manager. "I believe there is some problem," the manager said. "I am sorry about that. We do like to please our guests."

"Do you indeed!" said Mr Renfrew with passion. "So when I asked for a room with a view, you gave me this!"

"I am sorry, sir. As you did not specify what view you wished for, I assumed you were not particular about the view, as long as you had a view."

"But 'a view' surely means 'a nice view'!" said Mrs Renfrew, wearily.

"Does it?" asked the manager, "I am not sure it does. In any case, we cannot know what a guest means by nice unless the guest tells us."

"Good grief!" shouted Mr Renfrew.

"Do calm yourself, sir," said the manager. "The porter who showed you to your room tells me you wish for a view over the sea. He seems to think you probably mean the sea front here at Frimpton-on-Sea."

Mr Renfrew was about to explode, but his wife broke in quickly. "So you

are going to move us to a different room?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh no, ma'am. I regret we have no spare rooms at the moment. But we can change your view for you."

"How..." began Mr Renfrew. But his wife broke in, "Thank you very much, sir. I should like that very much."

"Very well," said the manager. "Why don't you unpack? And I expect you'll want to change out of those clothes and freshen yourselves up. I can assure you that when you come back up after your meal this evening, the view will have been changed."

With that, the manager bade them good afternoon and left. "Are you crazy?" began Mr Renfrew.

"Oh do shut up." said his wife. "I'm just about all in. All I want to do is unpack and shower. I don't care how he's going to do it as long as he's going to change our view."

Mr Renfrew could see his wife would not see reason in her present state, so he said no more and began unpacking, convinced that this was not going to be a good holiday. It had not exactly got off to a good start, had it?

By the time they had showered, changed and freshened up, they were beginning to feel better, and Mr Renfrew was more relaxed, though he still had doubts about the holiday. They went down to bar to have a drink before they went into the evening meal. They were agreeably impressed by what they saw of the hotel; the people at the bar seemed relaxed and happy enough. It was clear as they talked with other guests, that those guests were very happy here. "The staff really go out of their way to please," said one lady. "And the views are really terrific. I don't know how they do it!"

Mr Renfrew was a bit puzzled by this, but before he could say anything, the manager came across to the Renfrews. "I hope you're feeling better and that everything is all right," he said.

"Why, yes, thank you," replied Mrs Renfrew. "Our room is very comfortable."

"I am pleased," said the manager. "We want you to enjoy your stay here."

With that he moved on. Mr Renfrew found the lady they had been speaking with had moved to another group, so he and Mrs Renfrew decided to go into the dining room for their meal. They were surprised at the wide choice on the menu and delighted at the way each course was presented. After a good meal and good wine, even Mr Renfrew was beginning to feel that the holiday might not be so bad after all, and his wife was clearly enjoying it.

When they went back to their room, they were feeling very relaxed and happy and were not at all surprised to see that they were overlooking the seafront. Isn't that what the manager had said? They saw the lights twinkling along the Esplanade; when they opened the window, they could hear the sound of the sea and smell it. They went to bed feeling very happy and contented.

The next morning, Mr Renfrew woke up to the squawking of gulls and he

heard the sound of the sea. He got up and went to the window; yes, they were looking over the sea. 'But,' he thought, 'this is crazy. This is still the same room we checked into. You can't just change a view. This is some kind of trick.'

He went back to his bed and lay there trying to puzzle things out. A little later his wife woke up; she sat up in bed, looking at the view. "This is going to be a great holiday," she said. "We're in a lovely hotel and we have an excellent view over the sea."

"That's just it," said her husband. "I'm sure we're still facing the Majestic. This view is some trick."

"Oh do stop moaning," said his wife. "Can't you ever enjoy yourself? I hear the sea; I can feel the breeze and smell the sea. Of course we have a view of the sea!"

Mr Renfrew decided to say no more and called room service to bring them morning tea and a newspaper.

Later, when they had gone down to breakfast and found it as excellent as the meal had been the previous evening, the manager came up to them and asked if they were now happy with the view.

"Yes," said Mrs Renfrew, "It's exactly what I wanted."

"Yes," said Mr Renfrew. "But our room is still the same one we were shown into yesterday afternoon, isn't it? It's not really a view of the sea we have, is it? It must be some kind of trick."

"Oh no, sir," said the manager. "We do not trick our guests, we give them what they want if we possibly can. You do have a view of the sea."

"But, it is not possible," said Mr Renfrew. "It has to be a trick."

"Ah," said the manager. "It is to do with changing the time and relative dimension in space of the walls in your room. How can I explain? How familiar are you with quantum physics?"

Before Mr Renfrew could answer, Mrs Renfrew burst out laughing. "Him? Familiar with any sort of physics? He doesn't even understand what goes on under the bonnet of his car! Our view is lovely. I don't care how you managed it, it's lovely. Thank you very much."

"No trouble at all, ma'am," said the manager. "We do our best to keep our guests happy."

The manager went on his way. Mr Renfrew was not so happy. "Thank you for making me look stupid," he said sourly.

"Why did you have to argue with the manager?" she said. "He gave us our view. I can see that it's real, even if you can't or won't. I needed this holiday and I intend to enjoy it. I'm going up to the room to tidy up and then I'm off to the beach for the morning. If you want to moan, do it somewhere else."

She got up from table and went off.

It was mid-morning before Mr Renfrew got down to the beach. He found his wife had made friends with another couple, Mr and Mrs Trevelyan, who, it turned out, were staying in the Majestic. She introduced him to her friends. He

explained he had been reading his newspaper and had started the crossword and had not realized that it was so late in the morning.

They spent a pleasant enough day with the Trevelyans. As they were returning to their hotel in the late afternoon, Mr Renfrew began saying to his wife: "Actually, I wasn't doing the crossword before I came down. I went to see the manager. He explained they can change the view not only in space, so we can see the sea even if we don't face it, but they can also change it in time..."

"Oh, give it rest," said his wife, "and stop talking rubbish. I hope you did not upset the manager; I told you I wanted to enjoy this holiday."

When they got to their room, Mrs Renfrew was surprised and annoyed when she saw the view from their window. They were completely underwater! Sunlight was filtering down, so it was presumably not too deep.

"What the hell!" shrieked Mrs Renfrew. "What have you done now?" – she had no doubt who was to blame. "What on earth are those things?" she asked, pointing towards a group of ammonites.

"I don't know," said Mr Renfrew. "I merely said to the manager I would like a view from the time of the dinosaurs. 'Very good', he said. 'But which particular period,' and rattled off names I hadn't heard of. So I just said 'Jurassic'; it was the only one I knew. I expected to see dinosaurs, not this. But it's only a trick. Here, let me show you," he said, going over to the window to open it.

As he tried to open the window, he found it was jammed fast; but he did set off an alarm. Mrs Renfrew screamed, not only because of the alarm but also because she caught a glimpse of an ichthyosaur in the distance through the window.

There was a knock at the door and the manager came in. He switched off the alarm and said to Mr Renfrew, "It is not a good idea, sir, to open the window when you are undersea. The windows are constructed so that they will not open unless there is breathable atmosphere outside."

"What are you talking about?" said Mr Renfrew. "That window faces the Majestic Hotel; there's no real water there. It's only a trick."

"Sir," said the manager. "I assure you that *that* wall and window are really undersea. Did you not ask for a view in the Jurassic period? I assumed you would know that what we now call Frimpton was then under the sea. Do you not like the view, after all."

"No, I don't," said Mrs Renfrew. "Mr Renfrew asked for the view without telling me or, it seems, knowing what he was doing – which is not unusual for him. I like to have a window open at night; I like the fresh air. Could you please give us a view over the sea at Frimpton as it is now?"

"Certainly, ma'am," said the manager. "We will arrange that when you are having your evening meal. But as for fresh air, all our rooms are air-conditioned. Let me show you how it works."

The manager explained to Mrs Renfrew how the air-conditioner worked and she was very pleased to feel fresh air blowing across her face.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I am pleased you are happy now,” said the manager. “We do like to please our guests.”

With that he left. Mr Renfrew started to argue with his wife, but she ignored him. She was used to his grumbling. She decided to have a bath before changing for the evening meal and left her husband to sulk by himself.

Once again, after an excellent meal and good wine, the Renfrews both felt better. Mrs Renfrew thought to herself: “I’m enjoying it here on the beach in Frimpton-on-Sea; the Tevelyans are great company. We don’t spend much time in our room and I can get as much fresh air as I want at night. Heck! What’s in a view? A view is just a view, after all. Let him have whatever view he wants, if it keeps him happy and stops him grumbling.”

So it was agreed. He could have whatever view he wanted; she was going to be out all day in any case. She was here to relax and enjoy herself.

The next day Mr Renfrew did not join his wife and the Tevelyans till early afternoon. His wife did not ask him what he had been doing because, if the truth were known, she was not interested. He was not there to complain about anything and she could relax with pleasant company on the beach. She assumed he had been sitting around in the hotel reading his paper and doing his crossword. She would have been surprised if she had known that in fact he spent a considerable amount of the time talking with the manager and other personnel at the hotel.

When they got back to the room in the late afternoon, Mrs Renfrew hardly took any notice of the view from the window: a very strange landscape indeed, with a bluer sky than normal and an apparently large and very bright ‘moon’ setting in the west, and the sun rising in the east. Mr Renfrew got very excited.

“Look,” he said. “That’s on Kirion, which orbits around Alpha Centauri B. It has *two* suns! Just think of that! Look,” he went on, getting more excited, “its secondary sun, Alpha Centauri A, is just setting and its main sun is rising. Wow! Isn’t that something!”

“Yes” she said, disinterestedly. “It’s certainly a very interesting view.”

She just got on with her usual routine, both pleased that her husband had found something to keep him happy but also slightly disturbed, though she did not now why, at his unwonted enthusiasm.

Her husband was in very good spirits that evening. They both enjoyed their meal. “Yes,” thought Mrs Renfrew, “this holiday is, on the whole, going better than I could have hoped.” She could not help being amused at the thought that her husband, who had insisted that the views were just tricks, now seemed to react as though they were real, whereas she was now sure they were tricks of some sort.

The next day her husband appeared even later in the afternoon, and seemed to be rather excited, she thought, though he did manage to act normally in front of the Tevelyans. But when they got back to their room he was more

excited than she had ever know him to be.

“Look at that view!” he exclaimed, as they went into the room. “Do you know how far away that is from the earth?”

Without waiting for an answer, he went on: “Not just over 4 light years away, like Kirion where we were last evening. That’s some *52 million* light years away! Think of that,” he continued, “52 million light years.”

She didn’t think of that. But she did answer, truthfully as far as she was concerned, “That’s incredible.”

“Yes,” he said, not realizing how literal she was being. “You’re looking out on Ambriel, a planet orbiting a sun in an outer spiral of M88, one of the galaxies in the Virgo cluster. Isn’t that terrific! We’re actually looking at a view on a planet in a totally different galaxy. Wow!”

She looked. The view was certainly strange. The vegetation was nothing she recognized. They were some people moving about and structures she took to be houses. Some of the people reminded her quite distinctly of some of the hotel personnel. Yes, it was clearly a trick put on by the hotel. Why, even the name ‘Ambriel’ was obviously an anagram of Mirabel. Why didn’t her husband realize that? However she didn’t want to spoil things for him. She pretended the view was real and made some remarks about it.

The evening went very well. She was happy and so, apparently, was Mr Renfrew. But when she woke the next morning, she was surprised to find her husband already dressed. He seemed slightly agitated. “I shall be leaving you for a few days. Will you be all right?”

“Yes, of course I shall,” she said, “But where are you off to?”

“I’ve been invited to visit someone on Ambriel”, he said, pointing to the view through the window.

She laughed. “Just how do you propose to do that?” She was beginning to think he was starting to go soft in the head.

“I’m being picked up in a few minutes by a pod,” he answered. “Why don’t you come too? They really understand about God and the universe. We are just plain ignorant here on earth.”

‘God? Since when has he ever been interested in God?’ she thought. But before she could reply, a cigar-shaped object came and hovered outside of the window. Mr Renfrew opened the window and called out to his wife, “Coming?”

“For goodness sake, stop playing games!” she said.

Mr Renfrew waved to his wife and walked onto a boarding platform, which had appeared, and disappeared into the pod. The platform was retracted, the door closed and the pod flew off.

Mrs Renfrew was more annoyed than surprised. “What stupid game is he playing?” she wondered. She was getting tired of all this business of the views.

At breakfast the manager came to her and said, “I understand Mr Renfrew has gone away for a few days. Would you like the view over the sea-front again?”

“No, thank you,” answered Mrs Renfrew. “I think I should just like to have

the view of the side of the Majestic Hotel that we saw when we arrived.”

“Very good, ma’am,” he said.

Sure enough, when she went back to her room after breakfast, she was looking out at the Majestic. She found this comforting. This is what the view should be from their room; she also found it comforting to think of her new friends, the Trevelyan, in the Majestic.

When she met the Trevelyan on the beach she told them her husband had been called away on urgent business. Everything was back to normal, and she had no grumbling husband. She was going to enjoy the rest of her holiday. and, indeed, enjoy it she did.

When she returned to her room on the last afternoon of the holiday, she was not surprised to find her husband there. She did not know what he had been up to and she did not really care; but she had assumed he would come back before they left for home. What she had not expected was the enthusiastic way he greeted her and all he had to say to her.

He told her he had been on Ambriel, living in a loving, sharing community. He explained how ‘the Master’ had enlightened him and taught him the real truth about God. He had found peace and happiness. He urged her to join him.

As she listened, she was at first filled with disbelief which soon turned to anger – anger not with her husband but with herself. How could she have been so blind? How often had she counselled parents of teenagers who had gone off to join some cult or other? How often had she counselled people who had been ‘rescued’ from cults? How had she not known what had been happening to her husband? He had clearly been seduced into joining goodness knows what cult.

She knew the signs too well. It would be pointless to argue with him when he was in this state. She politely turned down his offer to join him. He said that he was sorry but had expected that answer, after all she was an “other-thinker”. He told her that he would be leaving for Ambriel shortly with two of the hotel staff and that he hoped she would one day find happiness. With that he left.

She had got used to dining by herself over the past few days. She quietly got on with packing. She would leave his things in the hotel. People there had obviously seduced him into joining this cult; they could sort out his belongings.

The next morning at breakfast the manager came up to her and said, “I am sorry you have not decided to join your husband. But I hope, ma’am, you have enjoyed your stay with us and that we shall see you again.”

“I have to go back home,” replied Mrs Renfrew. “I couldn’t join him. Yes, I have enjoyed the past few days, thank you.”

She did not add that she had no intention of returning to that hotel. As she drove home later that morning, she thought about Hotel Mirabel and its rooms with a view. It must be run by one of those weird cults that seem to emerge from north America. True, none of the staff had sounded American; this was perhaps a British outpost of the cult. But how had they done that trick with the views? “Time and relative dimension in space” – that’s what she had been told.

Was the hotel really a missionary outpost of a cult from a planet in another galaxy? No, that would be absurd.

One thing she was certain about. If she came to Frimpton-on-Sea again, she would stay in the Majestic; nor would she be fussy about the view. After all, she thought, a view is a just a view.

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