

RESERVATION DEFERRED

By JOHN WYNDHAM

Ghosts have changed since we were young. These days they (the female of the species anyway) have discarded the old-fashioned, unflattering shroud for bra and panties, and now wear nail polish and kiss-proof lipstick. And where the old-timers still cling to tradition, today's ghost wouldn't be caught dead rattling chains and screeching in attics on stormy nights.

Take Virginia, for example. You couldn't ask for a more attractive ghost. Yet even she was much too worldly, too cynical about matters most of us hold in reverence. To permit her to poison the mind of a sweet girl like Amanda, who was ill but still very much alive — well, whoever is in charge of phantoms should be court-martialed and shot!

DYING, at seventeen, and provided the circumstances allow it to be decorous, can be terribly romantic. The picture one makes: pretty, though a little pale, spiritual-eyed; displayed, as it were, against a pile of pillows, with the frills of the nylon nightie showing beneath the lacy wool bed-jacket; the lights in one's hair glistened by the bedside lamp, the slender hand so delicately ivory against the pale pink

silk of the eiderdown comforter.

The bud scarce unfurled, the dew still undried, the heart not yet hardened.

Character, too: patience, sweetness, gratitude for the little things people do, kindly forgiveness to the doctors one has defeated, sympathy for those who are weepy about one, resignation, quiet fortitude. It can all be very beautiful and sad-romantic, and not nearly so distressing as people think —



particularly if one is quite sure of heaven, as Amanda was.

Search as she might, she could find no more than a few feather-weight reproaches to lay upon herself. The one or two peccadilloes she had managed to dredge up from earliest childhood — matters concerning an ownerless penny spent on sweets, an apple that had fallen from a barrow, one's failure to own up to putting the thumb-tack on Daphne Deakin's chair — would, the Rev. Mr. Willis assured her, be unlikely to have any appreciable effect upon the granting of her entry permit. So, in a way, she had an advantage over other people who would have to go on living longer lives, and probably earning black marks in the course of them. There was a lot of compensation in being assured of heaven.

At the same time, she would have liked to be a little surer of what to expect there. Mr. Willis was positive enough about the place, but in such a general way; so difficult to pin down to details. He tended, too, to evade the more piercing questions, with unsatisfactory observations on the possibility of something happening which would make the exact nature of heaven a less urgent question for her. In fact, nobody seemed either to know much about heaven, or to be willing to discuss its organizations with her.

Dr. Frobisher, after admitting

his ignorance, always steered the conversation to what he called a less morbid topic — though how heaven, of all places, could be classified as morbid Amanda failed to understand. It was much the same with her mother. Mrs. Day's expression would cloud; she would answer awkwardly once or twice, and then say, "Darling, let's talk about something more cheerful, shall we?" So Amanda, though she did not in the least understand how heaven could be heaven if it weren't cheerful, would, in the sweetness of her disposition, talk about something quite uninteresting, instead.

Still, it was very nice to know that one was qualified for heaven, and that everyone was agreed about it. Rather like winning a scholarship and becoming self-supporting at an early age, and carrying something of an obligation to be kind and thoughtful towards those who had not such advantages.

A slow decline, someone had called it — a funny idea, that: the Present, the Imperfect, the Perfect — but it was prettier to think of petals falling, fluttering softly down until one day they would all be gone, and people would cry a little and say how brave she had been, and how happy she must be in heaven now.

And possibly it would have gone off tidily like that, but for the ghost.

Just at first, Amanda did not realise she was a ghost. When she woke up and saw her standing inside the door, she thought for a moment that perhaps they had now got a night nurse who was looking in to see how she was doing. Then it occurred to her that a nurse would very likely be wearing more than just silk panties and bra, and also that she oughtn't to be visible at all, because the room was dark. The ghost, seeing her there, showed a trace of surprise.

"Oh, sorry to intrude," she said. "I thought you would have gone by now." And she turned as if to leave.

She was a very unalarming-looking ghost. A friendly-seeming girl with slightly red hair, rather wide eyes, an enviable figure, and charming hands and feet. Amanda guessed her at about seven or eight years older than herself.

"No. Please don't go," she told her, on impulse.

The ghost turned back, a little surprised.

"You're sure you don't mind?" she said gratefully. "I mean, people are so touchy. Usually they scream."

"I don't see why," said Amanda. "Anyhow, I'll probably be a ghost or something myself soon."

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," said the ghost, in a social-polite voice.

"Come and sit down. You can put the eiderdown round you if

you feel cold," invited Amanda.

"Luckily, that's not one of my troubles," said the ghost, sitting down and crossing one elegant leg over the other.

"Er. . . my name's Amanda," Amanda told her.

"Mine's Virginia," said the ghost. "I can't imagine why."

There was a pause, during which Amanda's curiosity mounted. She hesitated, then she said: "I hope it's not something I shouldn't ask, but how do you happen to be a ghost? I mean, I thought people just went to one place or the other, if you see what I mean."

"One place or the other?" repeated Virginia. "Oh, I see. No, it isn't quite as simple as that. But, anyway, I'm a special case — a sort of D.P. at the moment. The whole thing is *sub judice*, so I just have to wander round until they've made up their minds."

Amanda was puzzled. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well," explained Virginia, "when my husband strangled me, it looked just like an ordinary murder, really. But then someone raised a question about the degree of provocation. If they decide I went above a particular reading, they can bring it in as suicide, which would be bad. Of course, I should appeal on grounds of prior counter-provocation. He's that tame sort who would provoke a saint into provoking him. I sup-

pose I did overdo it a bit. But if you knew him, you'd understand."

"What's it like? Being strangled, I mean?" Amanda asked, interestedly.

"Horrid, really," said Virginia. "And I'd have been more careful if I'd known it was going to lead to all this hanging around while they argue about it."

"It's disappointing," said Amanda. "I was hoping you might be able to tell me something about heaven."

"Heaven? Why?"

"Well," said Amanda, "nobody here seems to be able to tell me, and I expect to be going there soon. So I thought it'd be nice to know what it's like."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Virginia, opening her wide eyes wider.

Amanda did not see that there was any "Good gracious!" about it. Expecting to go to heaven seemed to her a very reasonable ambition. She said so.

"Dear, dear. Poor thing," observed Virginia compassionately.

In anyone less sweet than Amanda, her faint moue might have been called sulkiness. "I don't see what's wrong with that," she said.

"From personal observation, I wouldn't —" began Virginia.

"Oh, you do know about it, then?"

"I've looked it over. Parts of

it, anyway," Virginia admitted.

Amanda's interest kindled. She propped herself a little higher against the pillows. "Oh, please tell me about it, please!" she begged eagerly.

Virginia considered. "Well," she said, "the first district I saw was the oriental section. It's all very gorgeous and technicolored, and you wear lots of jewels and a veil and transparent trousers. The men wear beards and turbans, and you have to cluster round them in groups of not less than twenty to each. It looks a bit like autograph-hunting, only it isn't, of course. Then, after a time, he beckons one out of the mob, and it always turns out to be somebody else, and so you have to go and find another place to cluster, and everybody simply loathes you for crashing in on their lot. It's all terribly frustrating."

"Is that all?" asked Amanda unhappily.

"Pretty much. You can eat turkish-delight in the intervals of course, and I suppose by the law of averages —"

"I mean, it doesn't sound a bit like I thought."

"Oh, it's different in different sections. The Nordic part isn't a bit like that. There you spend nearly all your time washing and bandaging great gashes in heroes, and making broth for them in between whiles. I suppose it's all

right for people who happen to have had a hospital training, but it seemed frightfully gory and messy to me. Besides, the heroes are such types. Never take a scrap of notice of you. They're either bragging, or flat out, or just off to get some more gashes. All terribly tedious, I thought."

"That doesn't sound quite the kind —" Amanda began.

But Virginia went on: "Still, I must say, for high-octane tediousness you want to take a look at the Nirvana district. Talk about high-brow! You can only see it if you peep over the wall, because there's a notice saying 'No women allowed', and —"

"What I was meaning," Amanda interrupted firmly, "is the ordinary kind of heaven. You know, the one they tell us about when we're children, but never seem to explain properly."

"Oh, that one," said Virginia. "Oh, my dear! So prim. I wouldn't advise it, really. So much choral singing and poetry reading all the time. Good, you know, high quality and all that, but sort of serious — and the music being all trumpets and harps gets kind of monotonous. So much white's awfully tiring, too. The whole thing's frightfully — what's the word, antiseptic? — no, ascetic, that's it. They've got a no-marriage law there. Imagine it! The result is nobody dares even ask you out for a cup of coffee after the music

for fear of being arrested. Mind you, I daresay saints like it quite a lot —" She broke off. "You're not a saint, are you?"

" — I don't think so."

"Well, unless you are, I simply wouldn't recommend it." Virginia went on, giving details.

Amanda listened to her with growing dismay. At last she broke in: "But it just *can't* be like that. You're simply spoiling everything for me. I was so happy knowing I was going to heaven, too. I think you're just being cruel and beastly."

Virginia stared at her. Then she said: "But my poor dear, don't you understand. They're all men's heavens, and that's hell for women. Seems as if nobody ever got around to designing a heaven for women, don't ask me why. But, honest, I'd keep well clear of these men's heavens if I were you."

But at that point Amanda's tears overflowed. The sound of her own unhappy sobs prevented her from hearing any more, and when she looked up again Virginia had gone.

In fact, Amanda was so disappointed that she was irritable and surprised everyone by starting to get better.

And when she was quite well she married an accountant who seemed to think of heaven as the perfect cybernetics machine, and that wasn't very interesting to a girl, either.