

“Mrs. Amworth” by E.F. Benson, 1923

The eponymous antagonist in this story is remarkably free from the sexualization that most authors use to portray female vampires (she was played by Glynis Johns – Mrs. Banks in Disney’s *Mary Poppins* – in the 1975 movie adaptation). In fact, despite the chronic “pernicious anemia” in her neighborhood, Mrs. Amworth (nee Chaston) is a breath of fresh air in the town of Maxley. A lover of cooking, music, games, and gardening, she delights everyone but the retired Cambridge physician interested in the supernatural.

So naturally it’s Doctor Urcombe who identifies Mrs. Amworth as a vampiric spirit, and eventually persuades the narrator of the truth. The decision becomes easier after a floating Amworth appears in his dreams, and the real one recoils at the sign of a cross. Like Cthulhu himself, a collision with a vehicle proves to be only a temporary setback, but the narrator and Urcombe corral Amworth in her grave and dispatch the vampire permanently.

Disinformation: Urcombe informs us that the town of Maxley was a hotbed of vampire attacks “about three hundred years” before the story. We are also informed that Amworth has settled there to be where her ancestors once lived. He names Elizabeth Chaston as the 17th Century culprit, yet the family lived in the area for centuries after the initial crisis. Why mention this curious gap at all? Nothing is clarified when we learn of the similar outbreak occurred a year before the story, while Amworth was living in India. Without knowing more about the Chastons after they leave Maxley “a century ago,” the implication that they or the town are suspect arises simply because the narrator omits Mrs. Amworth’s first name.

And Urcombe seems as suspicious as anyone else in the tale. He is the only person to offer a paranormal explanation to anything happening in town. And apart from two nocturnal visions of Mrs. Amworth, the narrator only sees evidence of a vampire in the doctor’s presence. Someone who thinks that “all medical students should be obliged to pass some sort of examination in mesmerism” is probably no stranger to hypnosis himself.

Edward Benson wrote this story while his father was the Archbishop of Canterbury. Far from being a centuries-old vampire lord, Amworth cowers from Urcombe when he merely makes the sign of the cross in the air. Perhaps readers are to take comfort that the C of E can triumph over an Eastern myth.

A Deeper Look: Maxley is in Sussex, on one of the “main roads between London and Brighton.” **Traffic Analysis** easily identifies the village of Pyecombe, on the A23, as a likely stand-in: it has a Norman Church – whose original dedication is unknown – and was the site of plague in 1603. Using **Medicine** to pore through the county’s coroner’s rolls (or materials collected at some point by OAKES in an EDOM archive) uncovers the true name of her family. Alternatively, an agent can with **Law** comb treatises of Indian opinions or membership records at the Inns of Court, generating a list of judges who died in Peshawar around 1920. Either route eventually leads to the widow’s grave, in the cemetery of the Church of the Transfiguration.

Our murderous matron is an avid fan of piquet, a French card game enjoyed by upper-class Brits before World War Two. Sort of a mix between draw poker and pinochle, mastery of the game helps a good player to blend in above her status. Test **Gambling** at the table (in 1894, the

Difficulty is 4; in the 1920s, it's 5; in 1940, raise it to 6): the margin of success becomes a temporary **High Society** pool for use among your opponents' families, or the members of the club where you're playing.

Cool: There is no discernable connection between Maxley's medieval vampires – if indeed, an “outbreak” actually happened – and the town's prodigal daughter. **Vampirology** strongly suggests that the unfortunate widow died in the North-West Provinces and was possessed by a vetala. Chances are, moving through London's **High Society**, that an agent will meet someone whose grandparent crossed Amworth's path when she was in the Fishing Fleet. The tragic tale of a young bride's death would have eventually found its way west.

Warm: Mrs. Amworth is 45 years old in the story, so she's no more than two years younger than Lucy Westenra (*Director's Handbook*, p. 34). That makes it possible for them to be at the same school before the novel – or to have been Mina's pupil. Perhaps Dracula himself encountered her in London, and sent her East of Suez on some unguessable mission. Given her pedigree, she might have been his emissary to a powerful bhuta in the Punjab.

Speaking of her family, why does Benson mention the Chastons at all? The implied answer is that one of Mrs. Amworth's relatives was a vampire in the 17th Century; perhaps it's this grave that the agents should be looking for. After three centuries, maybe they are a dhampir bloodline, to serve as a foil to the Caldwells (*DH*, p. 160). Genealogical **Research** in Maxley locates the last scion there, drawn home like she was, now watching over the ancestral graves.

Given his interest in mesmerism, Francis Urcombe could be a relative of the Singletons, either the psychic in the novel, or his modern ancestor (*DH*, p. 96). He wanted Cambridge graduates to be versed in “appearances at time of death, haunted houses, vampirism, automatic writing, and possession” – a great syllabus for a vampire hunter. He's also a prime candidate for a stint as Drawes in the first half of the 20th Century, or a Duke who thinks he can keep a boot on Dracula's neck.

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Statistics after the slash apply to the vetala once its host dies. After burial, the spirit leaves the grave at night to continue its depredations. Once a vetala has possessed a host, nothing short of an exorcism will separate them before the latter's death. Like the Enigmatic Monsignor (*DH*, p. 114), the exorcist should be an ordained celebrant of a religion that recognizes this hazard (which covers many of the well-known ones) or have an **Occult** rating of 3. Treat the ritual as a contest of the performer's Stability against the vetala's Aberrance. The spirit is free to use any means at its host's disposal to resist.

General Abilities: Aberrance 7, Hand-to-Hand 10, Health 11, plus host's abilities

Hit Threshold: 3/5 in shadows or darkness; 3 in the lighted open

Alertness Modifier: +0

Stealth Modifier: +0/+2 in shadows or darkness; +1 (silent) in the lighted open

Damage Modifier: -1 (fists)/+0 (fangs)

Armor: none/physical weapons do no damage; fire does 1 point (Immaterial)

Free Powers: Darkvision, Drain

Other Powers: Possession (permanent), Turn to Bat

Banes: stake through the heart

Blocks: lead (absolute)

Compulsions: drain single victims until their death

Dreads: Christian symbols

Requirements: drink blood, return to grave before sunrise