

SIMPLIFIED READERS

# Horror Stories

E. F. BENSON - AMELIA B. EDWARDS - MARY E. BRADDON - ALGERNON BLACKWOOD



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HORROR STORIES

E. F. Benson - Amelia B. Edwards - Mary E. Braddon - Algernon Blackwood

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# CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1</b> Mrs. Amworth (E.F. Benson) . . . . .	4
Activities . . . . .	18
<b>Chapter 2</b> The Phantom Coach (Amelia B. Edwards) . . . . .	20
Activities . . . . .	32
<b>Chapter 3</b> Good Lady Ducayne (Mary E. Braddon) . . . . .	34
Activities . . . . .	50
<b>Chapter 4</b> Keeping His Promise (Algernon Blackwood) . . . . .	53
Activities . . . . .	68
Glossary . . . . .	70
About the Authors . . . . .	74

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**MRS. AMWORTH**

E.F. Benson

The strange events took place last summer and autumn in the village of Maxley in Sussex.

Maxley is the sweetest, most beautiful place in England. The wind from the north brings the smell of the sea. The wind from the west brings the smell of the forest. The village is not very crowded. It has a single street, which is a broad road with grass on both sides. The little church and the old graveyard are on this street. There are also several small houses here. They are made of red brick, and they have long windows and small flower gardens in front. There are also some shops and several little cottages on this street. It is a very peaceful little place. Only on Saturdays and Sundays, our quiet streets become crowded with motor cars and bicycles that travel from London to Brighton.

I am the owner of one of the small red-bricked houses. I am also neighbours with Francis Urcombe. He is a very interesting man. He was a professor of physiology at Cambridge University, but he retired and moved here two years ago. He lives in the house opposite mine. He spends most of his time studying strange supernatural<sup>1</sup> events, like haunted houses, vampirism, and automatic writing.

Last spring, we welcomed another new neighbour into our little village. Her name was Mrs. Amworth, and she was the widow of an

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<sup>1</sup> supernatural: events, forces or powers that cannot be explained by the laws of science and that seem to involve gods or magic

Indian civil servant. Her husband had been a judge in India, and after his death, she came back to England. After a year in London, she moved here for the good weather and the sunshine. Her ancestors had lived in Maxley until a hundred years ago. Many of them were **buried** in the old graveyard. Some of the stones had the name 'Chaston' on them. This was her family name.

Mrs. Amworth was a big and energetic lady. She had a lively and friendly personality. She brought life to our village. She gave lunch-parties and little dinners. In the evenings, we could go to her house and play a game of piquet together. She was a hospitable hostess and would always have coffee and cookies. She played the piano and sang and had a lovely voice. She was always happy and cheerful. She was interested in everything, and she was good at music, gardening, and games.

Everybody liked her; we all thought that she brought sunshine to our village. Well, I say everybody, but there was one person who did not like her. That person was Francis Urcombe. He said that he did not like her, but he also said that he was greatly interested in her. He would always watch her with interest. I thought this was strange because I could not see anything bad about her. She was a healthy and normal person.

Mrs. Amworth said that she was forty-five years old, but this was difficult to believe. She looked ten years younger than that. She was very active and had perfect skin and black hair.

We became good friends, so Mrs. Amworth often called me and invited me to social activities. Sometimes I would tell her that I could not go because I was busy writing. She would then laugh and wish me a good evening of work. Sometimes Urcombe would be at my house, and when Mrs. Amworth called, he would ask me to invite her. He said



*His attention would be fixed on Mrs. Amworth. He would look like a man who was trying to solve a problem.*

he wanted to watch us play piquet, so he could watch and learn the game. But I knew that he was not interested in learning piquet. His attention would be fixed on Mrs. Amworth. He would look like a man who was trying to solve a problem. She did not **notice** this.

But then, something happened that changed things. One evening in July, Urcombe was with me. We were chatting. He was telling me about vampirism in the middle ages. He told me about the history of the vampire visits. Vampires were the dark spirits who lived inside a man or a woman. They had supernatural powers like flying like a bat, and they drank human blood at night. When the host body died, the spirits continued to live in the dead body. They rested during the day and were active at night. They were found in all of the European countries during the middle ages.

‘There have been hundreds of **witnesses** in history. Even here, in this area there was an **epidemic** of vampirism three hundred years ago, and our village Maxley was the centre of it. I believe that vampires are not extinct. There was an epidemic of vampirism in India two years ago.’

At that moment, I heard a knock on my door. I went and opened it. It was Mrs. Amworth.

‘Come in,’ I said. ‘And save me from Mr. Urcombe’s terrifying stories. He has been trying to frighten me.’

‘Ah, how lovely!’ she said. ‘I love being frightened. I love ghost stories, Mr. Urcombe.’

‘It wasn’t a ghost story,’ he said. He was watching her carefully. ‘I was only saying that vampirism was not dead. There was an epidemic in India a few years ago.’

There was a silence, and I saw that Mrs. Amworth was looking at Urcombe carefully. Then she laughed cheerfully.

‘Oh, where did you hear about that, Mr. Urcombe?’ she said. ‘I’ve lived in India for years and have never heard of such a thing. Some storyteller in the bazaars must have created this story.’ She laughed again.

Urcombe was about to say something, but stopped.

‘You’re probably right,’ he said.

Something changed that night. Mrs. Amworth was not very cheerful. She did not enjoy the piquet and left after a few games. Urcombe had been silent all night, too. After she left, he spoke.

‘There was a very **mysterious** disease in India. She and her husband were there. And...’

‘Well?’ I asked.

‘He was one of the **victims**. I had forgotten that when I talked about it.’

After that night, things were different. When Mrs. Amworth called me for a game of piquet, if I told her that Mr. Urcombe was with me, she would say that she did not want to disturb us and would wish me good night.

\* \* \*

That summer was very hot and rainless in Maxley. Besides drought, we had another problem: big black flies. The flies came at night and bit people, and their bite was poisonous. They did not bite the hands or face, but always chose the neck.

Then, in the middle of August, a mysterious illness appeared. Dr. Ross, our local doctor, thought it was because of the heat and the bite of the poisonous insects. The **patient** was a boy of sixteen. He was the son of Mrs. Amworth's gardener. His face was white, and he was very weak. He also had dizziness and a bad appetite. Also, he had two small wounds on his neck. Dr. Ross thought that one of the big flies had bitten him.

The weather had begun to get cooler, but this did not help the boy to get better. He was given a lot of good food, and he ate it all hungrily, but he still looked as thin as a skeleton.

One afternoon, I met Dr. Ross in the street. I asked him about the boy.

'I'm afraid he's dying,' he said. 'I don't know how to help him. Do you think Mr. Urcombe could see him? He may be able to help me.'

'Well, Urcombe is having dinner with me this evening,' I said. 'Would you like to join us?'

'I have other plans. But I can drop by later tonight.'

Later that evening, after we had finished our dinner, Dr. Ross came by. He explained the mysterious illness to Urcombe, and they left together to have a look at the boy.

I was left alone, so I called Mrs. Amworth. I went to her house and had a nice evening of music and piquet. She told me about the ill boy. She said she visited him often and took him healthy food. But she thought he was not getting better and would soon die. She had tears in her eyes when she told me this. I did not tell her that Urcombe had gone to **examine** the boy.



After our game, she wanted to take a walk to get some fresh air and to borrow a gardening magazine from me, so she walked with me to my door.

‘Ah, this lovely night air,’ she said. ‘Night air and gardening are the medicines. There is nothing better than touching the soil. You feel fresh.’ She laughed out loud cheerfully. ‘I love air and soil,’ she said. ‘I look forward to death, when I will have the soil all around me.’

I brought her the magazine.

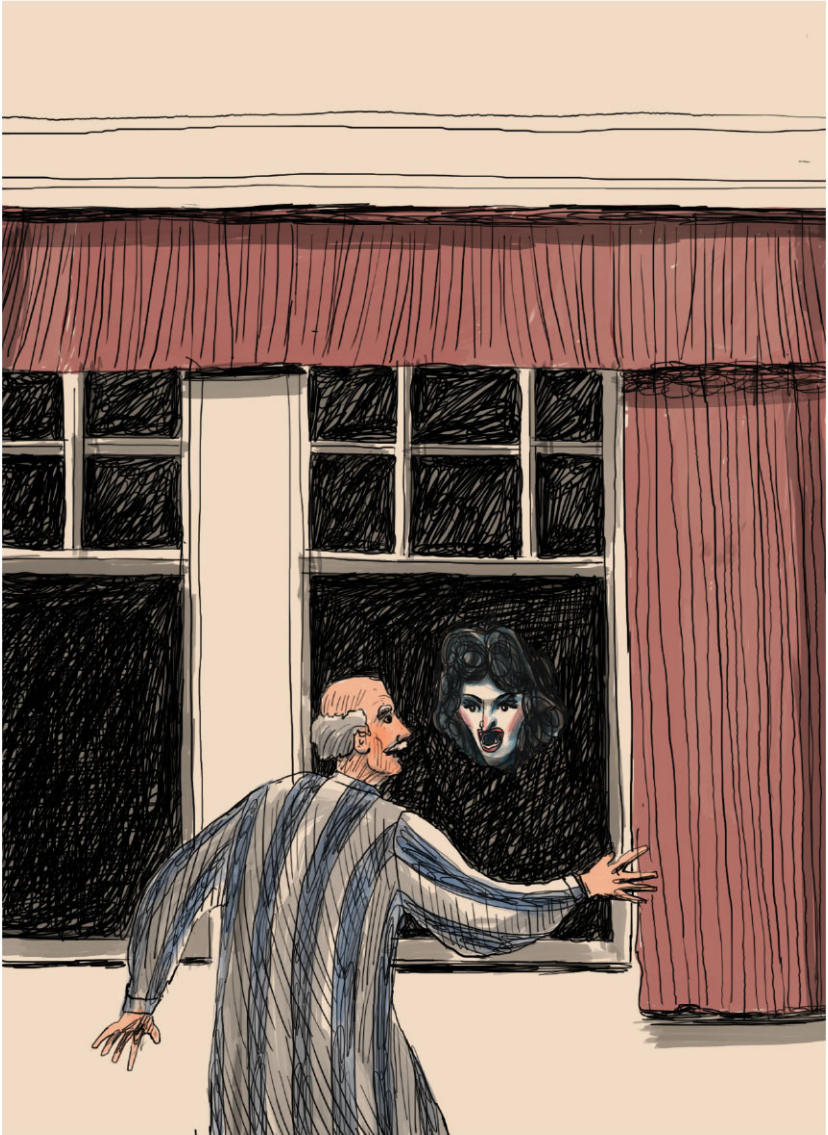
‘Thank you very much,’ she said. ‘And good night. Don’t forget: do gardening and keep your windows open. You will never get ill.’

‘I always sleep with my windows open,’ I said.

I went up to my bedroom. I changed my clothes, switched off my lights, and went to sleep. I had a horrible dream. In the dream, I woke up to find that my windows were shut. I got up to open them. But when I opened the first one, I saw Mrs. Amworth’s face in the darkness outside, smiling at me. I closed the window and went to the second window. When I opened it, I saw Mrs. Amworth’s face smiling at me again. In panic, I tried every window, and every time Mrs. Amworth’s face appeared. Then I woke up from the nightmare. My room was cool and quiet, and the windows were open.

I woke up late next morning. I got ready and went downstairs. Then, Urcombe called me. He wanted to see me immediately. He came in. He looked serious and thoughtful.

‘I want your help,’ he said. ‘But first I must tell you what happened last night. The doctor took me to his patient. The boy was very weak. Immediately I knew the cause of his illness. The boy is the victim of a vampire.’



*In panic, I tried every window, and every time Mrs. Amworth's face appeared.*

I sat down. He continued to explain.

‘I told the doctor that the boy should be moved into my house. As we were carrying the boy, we met Mrs. Amworth. She was shocked to see that we were moving him. Why do you think she was shocked?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘Then let me continue. We came to my house. I put the boy in the bedroom upstairs. He was in bed, and I turned off all the lights in the room. I stayed in the room and watched. One window was a little open because I had forgotten to close it. Around midnight, I heard something outside the window. Something was trying to push it open. Quietly I went to the window and looked. I saw the face of Mrs. Amworth outside the window. Her hand was on the window. I went very slowly and closed the window down.’

‘But it’s impossible,’ I cried. ‘How could she be flying in the air?’

I remembered my nightmare from the night before.

‘All night long, until sunrise, she stayed there outside the window, like some terrible bat.’

I was shocked. I did not know what to say.

‘Now think of everything that I have told you,’ Urcombe said. ‘One: there was a disease in India, and her husband died of it. Two: Mrs. Amworth did not want me to move the boy to my house. Three: she, or the thing that lives in her body, tried to come into the room. Four: in the middle ages, there was an epidemic of vampirism here at Maxley. The vampire was Elizabeth Chaston... Yes, Chaston, Mrs. Amworth’s family name. And five: the boy is better and stronger this morning.’

‘And what do you think?’ I asked.

There was a long silence.

‘I have something to add,’ I said.

I told him of my dream.

‘I’m glad you woke up,’ he said. ‘Now, you must help me. You will save others, and you will save yourself.’

‘What do you want me to do?’ I asked.

‘We have to watch this boy and make sure she does not come near him. We will find the evil thing and kill it. It is not human; it is a monster in the shape of a human.’

It was now eleven o’clock. I went to Urcombe’s house and stayed with the boy while Urcombe slept. For the next twenty-four hours, one of us was always in the room with the boy. He was getting better.

The following day was Saturday. It was a beautiful morning. The traffic of motor cars had already begun. As I was going to Urcombe’s house, I saw him come out of the house with a smile on his face. He told me the patient was feeling much better. At the same time, I saw Mrs. Amworth walking towards me with a basket in her hand. We all met in the middle of the grass next to the road.

‘Good morning to you both,’ she said. ‘I’m very happy to hear that your patient is doing well, Mr. Urcombe. I have come to bring him some jelly and to sit with him for an hour. We are very good friends.’

Urcombe paused and thought. And then he pointed his finger at her. He drew a cross in the air.

‘I forbid that,’ he said. ‘You will not sit with him or see him. And you know the reason.’

Suddenly, her face changed. It was horrible. Her face lost colour and was now grey. She put up her hand to **protect** herself from the pointing finger. She backed away towards the road.

It all happened very quickly. I heard a car horn, and then the sound of the breaks, and then a shout. It was too late. The car had hit her, and she was killed.

Three days later, she was buried in the cemetery outside Maxley. The people of the village were shocked by her sudden and terrible death. But slowly things went back to normal. Only Urcombe and I knew that we had escaped the danger. But strangely Urcombe was still worried about something. I asked, but he would not tell me.

September came, and then October. Urcombe was finally feeling more relaxed. But before November came, something terrible happened.

\* \* \*

One night, I had dinner with some friends at the other end of the village. At eleven o’clock, I said goodnight and started walking back home. The moon was shining. I was passing the house where Mrs. Amworth had lived. Then suddenly, I heard her front gate click open. I turned and saw her. I froze with horror. She was standing there, but could not see me because I was in the shadow of a tall tree. She crossed the road and entered the gate of another house.

Breathlessly, I ran to Urcombe’s house.

‘What have you come to tell me?’ he asked. ‘I think I know what

happened.’

‘You can’t know,’ I said.

‘She has come back, and you have seen her. Tell me about it.’

I told him.

‘That’s Major Pearsall’s house,’ he said. ‘Let’s go there now.’

‘But what can we do?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. We’ll find out.’

A minute later, we were in front of Major Pearsall’s house. We saw lights in the windows upstairs. Then, Major Pearsall opened the door. He saw us and stopped.

‘I’m going to Dr. Ross,’ he said quickly. ‘My wife is very ill. She went to bed an hour ago, and when I went upstairs, I found her white as a ghost and very tired. Please excuse me.’

‘One moment, Major,’ said Urcombe. ‘Was there any mark on her neck?’

‘How did you know?’ he said. ‘Yes. One of those terrible flies must have bitten her twice. She was bleeding.’

‘Is there someone with her?’ asked Urcombe.

‘Yes, her maid is with her.’

Major Pearsall went away. Urcombe turned to me. ‘I know what we have to do,’ he said. ‘Go home and change your clothes. I’ll meet you at your house in ten minutes. We’re going to the cemetery.’

When we met ten minutes later, he was carrying a pick, a shovel<sup>2</sup>, a screwdriver, and some rope. As we walked, he told me about his plan.

‘You will think this is very strange, but we have to do it,’ he said, ‘Luckily, you saw the body of Mrs. Amworth tonight. The vampire spirit still lives in her body. This is not surprising. I had been waiting for this to happen. We will take out her body, and we will find it in perfect condition.’

‘But she has been dead for two months,’ I said.

‘If the vampire has her body, the body does not decay. I will do something, but remember I will do it to the evil spirit, not to her.’

‘But what are you going to do?’ I said.

‘I will tell you. Right now the vampire is out to get food. But it must go back before sunrise. We must wait for it to come back to the grave. And then we will dig out the soil and lift up her body. If I am right, she will look like she was in life. After sunrise, the vampire cannot leave the body, and then I will strike her with this pick. It will go through the heart. And then the vampire spirit will be dead. Then we must bury her again.’

We came to the cemetery. The moonlight helped us find her grave. We hid behind a tree and waited. The night was warm. We waited for a long time.

Finally, at five o’clock, it came. Urcombe pointed his finger to the right. A woman, tall and large, was moving quietly. She came to the

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<sup>2</sup> shovel: a large heavy tool that has a sharp curved metal bar with sharp ends fixed at the centre to a wooden handle. It is used for breaking rocks or hard ground.

shovel: a tool with a long handle that is used for lifting and moving earth, coal, or snow

grave. I could easily see her face. It was Mrs. Amworth.

She wiped her mouth with her hand and then laughed out loud. Her laughter made me very nervous. Then she jumped into the grave and **disappeared.**

‘Come,’ said Urcombe.

We went to the grave. We dug out the soil. It took a long time to lift up the coffin. The sun was now rising in the east. Urcombe opened the lid, and we looked. We saw the face of Mrs. Amworth. The eyes were open, the cheeks and the lips were red. She had a smile on her face.

‘I will strike once,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to look.’

He held the pick in both hands and then with full force brought it down. A terrible cry came from her lips. The colour of her face changed to grey.

‘It’s all over,’ Urcombe said. He closed the coffin.

The morning was coming fast now. We put the coffin back into the grave and covered it with soil. As we walked back to Maxley, the birds were singing.





### ACTIVITIES

**A. Double puzzle:** Unscramble each of the clue words. Copy the letters in the numbered cells to the cells with the same number in the key word.

RUBY: put something into a hole in the ground

--	--	--	--	--

5

RAPPASDEI: become impossible to see

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

6 1

DIMCEEPI: a widespread disease

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

4

2

ROPTETC: keep someone safe

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

3

Key word:

V						
---	--	--	--	--	--	--

1 2 3 4 5 6

**B. Match the nouns on the left with their definitions on the right.**

	A person who...
1. <b>victim</b> _____	a. is getting medical treatment, especially in a hospital
2. <b>patient</b> _____	b. sees something (accident, crime, etc.) happen and describes it to others
3. <b>witness</b> _____	c. has been hurt or killed because of a crime, a disease, or an accident

**C. Write the missing letters and complete the synonyms of the words in bold.**

1. Mrs Amworth's husband had died of a <b>strange and unexplained</b> disease.	m _ _ t _ _ i _ _ s
2. The doctor asked Urcombe to <b>check</b> the patient because he was unable to help him.	e x _ _ _ n _
3. The narrator <b>saw</b> that Urcombe was interested in Mrs Amworth.	n _ _ _ c _ d

**D. True or False?**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Life in Maxley was peaceful and quiet every day of the week.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Francis Urcombe was interested in studying supernatural events.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Mrs. Amworth had a positive personality that the people in the village liked.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Francis Urcombe believed that vampires had gone extinct a long time ago.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The boy who got ill ate a lot of good food, but he still lost weight.

**E. Discuss the following questions.**

1. The narrator had a bad dream. Describe the dream.
2. Who was the vampire that lived in Maxley during the middle ages?
3. How did Urcombe and the narrator feel when Mrs. Amworth died?
4. When the vampire came back, how did Urcombe get rid of her?

## GLOSSARY

### Chapter 1 - Mrs. Amworth (E.F. Benson)

**bury** (v) to bury something means to put it into a hole in the ground and cover it up with earth

**disappear** (v) to become impossible to see

*ant.* appear

**epidemic** (n) if there is an epidemic of a particular disease somewhere, it affects a very large number of people there and spreads quickly to other areas

**examine** (v) to look at somebody/something closely, to see if there is anything wrong or to find the cause of a problem

**mysterious** (adj) difficult to understand or explain; strange and interesting

**notice** (v) to see or hear somebody/something; to become aware of somebody/something

**patient** (n) a person who is receiving medical treatment, especially in a hospital

**protect** (v) to make sure that somebody/something is not harmed, injured, damaged, etc.

**victim** (n) a person who has been attacked, injured or killed as the result of a crime, a disease, an accident, etc.

**witness** (n) a person who sees something happen and is able to describe it to other people

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**E.F. Benson** (1867-1940) was an English novelist, biographer, memoirist, archaeologist, and short story writer. He wrote nearly 100 books on a wide range of subjects. His successful novels include *Mrs. Ames* (1912), *Queen Lucia* (1920), *Miss Mapp* (1922), and *Lucia in London* (1927).

**Amelia B. Edwards** (1831-1892) was an English novelist, journalist, traveller, and Egyptologist. Her most successful works included the ghost story 'The Phantom Coach' (1864), the novels *Barbara's History* (1864) and *Lord Brackenbury* (1880), and the Egyptian travelogue *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (1877).

**Mary E. Braddon** (1837-1915) was an English novelist. Braddon published more than 70 novels and a number of plays. She is best known for her sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), which has also been dramatised and filmed several times. Among her other novels are *Aurora Floyd* (1863), *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), *Dead Men's Shoes* (1876), *Vixen* (1879), *Asphodel* (1881), *London Pride* (1896), and *The Green Curtain* (1911).

**Algernon Blackwood** (1869-1951) was an English writer. He wrote tales of mystery and the supernatural. His collections of short stories include *The Empty House* (1906), *John Silence* (1908), and *Tales of the Uncanny and Supernatural* (1949). Later in his life, Blackwood became famous as a teller of ghost tales on British radio and television.

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