

## A Good Start To The Day

by Evelyn Hood

As Amelia Harrison opened the front door to collect the milk she had no need to stoop, for the bottle immediately appeared, on a level with her short-sighted eyes.

“Oh – good morning!” she said brightly, taking it from a tentacle. “You’re late on your round this morning, aren’t you?”

Without waiting for an answer, because she knew of old that the milkman was a surly man who rarely troubled to reply, she shut the door and went back to the kitchen.

The creature on the doorstep paused for a moment, baffled. The tips of its tentacles brushed the closed door, and then it turned and slithered down the steps and round the side of the small semi-detached house. A section of hedge withered away at its approach, and it oozed through the gap into the next garden.

“The milkman was just delivering,” Amelia was saying in the kitchen. “Now where have I put my spectacles? I thought I caught sight of a flash of yellow in that bush by the front door, Ethel. Perhaps the first rose has opened out. Only, without my spectacles – ah, here they are.”

She fitted the spectacles on the bridge of her nose and lit the gas under the frying pan, while her sister Ethel groaned and poured out another cup of black coffee. The sisters were very different. Ethel was the younger by several years, and still quite pretty. She enjoyed parties and often suffered, as she was suffering now, from mornings after the nights before.

Amelia was the serious, clever one. The non-smoker and non-drinker; the steady wage-earner who kept them both going during Ethel’s frequent spells between jobs. She was saved from being a stuffy frump by her unflinchingly cheerful attitude towards everyone and everything.

“I’m going to have bacon and eggs,” she announced with a beaming smile. Ethel hurriedly rose from the table and stood over the sink, coffee cup in hand.

“I do love to see that yellow rose bush flowering. Remember when we were little girls and mother had a whole bed of yellow roses? Beautiful.”

Ethel grunted. Speech was an effort on her bad mornings. She raised her eyes from the sink and looked out of the window. Her jaw dropped when she saw that a section of hedge had apparently been burned to a crisp overnight.

“I always thought that yellow roses looked so bridal.”

“The hedge-“ Ethel said furrily.

“If I had married I would have wanted yellow roses in my bouquet. But there-“ said Amelia bravely, “who would ever have looked at plain old me? Ah well...”

Ethel caught sight of something grey and nasty moving along the side of the house next door. Thin tentacles waved around in the air as the thing lurched clumsily over the gravel path.

“No sense in day-dreaming with so much to do.” Amelia flipped rashers over in the pan and broke an egg deftly into the sizzling fat. “Will I phone the electrician about that faulty switch, or will you?”

“Erk!” said Ethel. The strange thing had managed to climb up next door’s back steps and was feeling round the wall. It seemed to want to get into the house.

“I’ll do it, shall I? I can call in when I collect my suit from the cleaner at lunch time.”

Her voice rambled on while Ethel watched Mrs. Kinney from next door stepping from her back door. Mrs Kenney glanced down, and opened her mouth to scream. Ethel also opened her mouth to scream and then shut it again with a gulp as the grey thing deftly whipped and twirled its tentacles about Mrs. Kenney’s dressing-gowned body.

Amelia slid the bacon and eggs onto the plate and seated herself at the table.

“Talking of things to do, have you remembered that I’ll be out tonight? I’ve got a meeting and no time to come home first. There’s a nice chop in the fridge for you.”

“Aaaarrggghhh!” said Ethel. Mrs Kenney had been trussed in something from head to toe. Now, resembling a fat cigar, she was being dragged down her own back steps and round the side of the house.

“I know you don’t feel like eating now, but you’ll enjoy something tasty tonight – I know you will.”

Ethel bolted from the room, ignoring her sister’s cry of, “Oh dear, poor old tum upset?” She reached the front window just in time to see the grey thing, along with the cigar that was Mrs. Kinney, dissolving through the circular flowerbed in the middle of the Kinneys’ front lawn.

Ethel pressed her face against the window, her bulging eyes searching what she could see of next door’s garden. Mr. Kenney’s car had gone from the drive, which meant that he was already on his way to work, little knowing that his wife seemed to have disappeared under the flower bed he had carefully weeded only the evening before. The street was empty; nobody else was in sight; only Ethel had seen what had happened.

She was still at the window, unable to think clearly, when her sister chirruped from the hall, “I’m going off to the office now, dear.”

Ethel flew to the door, grabbing Amelia’s arm and babbling about burned hedges and grey jelly creatures and cigars disappearing into flowerbeds. Amelia shook her head before leading her sister gently back to the kitchen and pouring out another strong black coffee.

“Just you drink that up and then go back to bed and have a nice sleep. I’ll phone your office and tell them that you can’t come in today. And then I’ll arrange an appointment with the doctor. I did tell you that all those little drinks would tell one day, didn’t I dear?”

“But – the hedge!”

Amelia looked out of the back window. “Mr Kinney was using that horrid flame gun last night on his poor weeds, while you were out. I knew he’d damage the hedge sooner or later; I always predicted it. You’re over-excited, Ethel, that’s what’s wrong with you.”

“But-”

“Think for a moment, dear. What else could it be but imagination?” Amelia laughed a tinkly laugh. “A grey jelly indeed! It sounds like something from outer space! Only it didn’t even come from outer space, did it? Under the ground, indeed! Two aspirins and then bed.”

Ethel watched forlornly from the front window as her sister went down the steps, sniffed the summer air, and inspected the yellow rose bush. Amelia pointed at the first little yellow rose, nodded encouragingly at the pale face peering out from between the curtains, and walked down the path. As she reached the end of the road, Ethel thought that she glimpsed a grey shapeless shadow gliding along behind her.

The yellow rose that had just blossomed on the bush by the front door trembled in the breeze, and then trembled again. The petals began to drop off in a soft cloud, as though the bush were being shaken by something much more violent, and much more menacing, than a peaceful summer's breeze.