

THE WHITBREAD

Stories



selected by

CHRISTOPHER
SINCLAIR-STEVENSON

THE WHITBREAD STORIES 1



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INTRODUCTION

There is a distinct prejudice against the form of the short story. On many occasions I have been shocked to hear critics and writers speak disparagingly of it on the grounds that a short story cannot develop character or plot, simply because it *is* short. I mutter balefully, and with growing aggression, names like Maupassant and Colette, Frank O'Connor and William Trevor, V. S. Pritchett and Graham Greene, Katherine Mansfield and Chekhov (and I am not even allowed to get on to the Americans), but the prejudice remains undiminished.

It is, therefore, particularly satisfying that Whitbreads have instituted a new prize, awarded for the first time in 1985, specifically for the best unpublished short story by a writer aged between sixteen and twenty-five. Twelve stories have been selected from the 149 entries and now appear in this first collection of Whitbread Stories.

When Martin Amis and I read the stories we had no idea of the ages of the writers. This was entirely appropriate so that we were not tempted to favour those nearer sixteen than twenty-five. As it transpired, the ages of the selected writers range from seventeen to twenty-four. The range of subject matter is, of course, far wider. Certain recurring themes did emerge. There were a great many stories concerned with the unfairness of parents, the unfairness of school-teachers, the unfairness of life itself. There were a number of attempts — almost all unsuccessful — at what can loosely be called genre stories: fantasy, science fiction, the ghost story. There was not much humour, there were rather too many stories heavily influenced by either James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. There was a deep fascination with madness.

The theme of madness does indeed appear in this collection, most obviously and remarkably in David Rogers' story, but also

highly originally in Tim Etchells' 'Mad Brother'. There is fantasy in Vanessa Brunning's sinister tale of peculiar goings-on in an old people's home, and there is a glimpse of the extra-terrestrial in Leonard Dean-King's 'Good Intentions', which manages the difficult task of making science fiction both comic and touching. Richard Hale's 'Down the Light-Well' also has its comic element, though it is essentially a study in disintegration. Patrick Gale's 'Borneo' is a sharply-observed piece of social comedy with a tragic core which will appeal to admirers of Alan Ayckbourn's plays.

Nicholas Butt's 'A Man of the Body' is the longest story in the collection, indeed it is two stories in one; it is also an extraordinarily vivid evocation of the age-old enmity between Greek and Turk, and of the power of God to overcome the results of that enmity. D. A. Herling's 'Ghost Writing' is perhaps the most consciously 'literary' of all the stories, in that it concerns the involvement of the writer with his characters and with the plot which he weaves around them. Mark Illis and Philippa Tyson both present portraits of loners, though the two stories are totally different in atmosphere and approach: Loomis is a master of illusion and sleight-of-hand, so that he even fights like a dancer; Miss Tyson's down-and-nearly-out Irishman in Liverpool with his disastrous sentimental memories is something else again. Ruth McCracken's characters are also Irish, two brothers caught up in the holocaust of trench warfare at Thiepval and their parents waiting for those inevitable telegrams. Finally, there is Diane Rowe's very funny and often gloriously rude diary kept by a girl who may seem, at first glance, to be a down-market female *Adrian Mole* but who turns out to be completely different.

These, then, are the stories in the first collection of *Whitbread Stories*, the first, I hope, of many such annual collections.

Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson

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THE FACE OF THE HORNE MAGDALENE

Vanessa F. Brunning

Agatha Scritchwallow was a small woman with grey skin and wild eyes. She gave the impression that her life lay in the direct path of an express train and that from the moment of her birth she must always be running from it, always on the look-out lest it should catch her off her guard and run her down. For this reason she was beginning to go bald at forty and what patches of hair she still had hung in clumps like couch-grass or the fur of an old and misused teddy bear over her terrified magnolia eyes.

Major Scritchwallow's eyes were a deep pink in colour. He had once contracted some hideous skin disease whilst serving in India. He had been an officer out there for many years and had killed lots of men but his eyes had never recovered their natural shade and they gave his face an uncharitable air even in his more pensive moments. They were smiling now, however, a little vermilion smile of welcome, while his dry, prune-brown, thin, lizard lips echoed the sentiment joyously. 'Welcome, my dear Mrs. Bruise. Welcome, welcome to our humble home. Welcome to Placculent House.' His angular limbs were straining forward over the balcony in the effort of effulgence like some gigantic asymmetrical spider.

'Well, here we are then, mother.'

Behind the wheelchair where Mrs. Bruise sat, small and damp and woollen, was a tall, nervous young man with thin hair, smoking a pipe that was much too large for him. He wheeled his mother noiselessly over the threshold. 'I hope you'll be happy here.'

'I'm sure she will, sir. I'm sure she will. We shall do our utmost.' And Major and Mrs. Scritchwallow received Mrs. Bruise with open arms.

Her fine-haired son stayed for a respectable length of time, then he kissed his mother's bluish cheeks and left very quickly in an old Morris Minor.

'Welcome to Placculent House, Mrs. Bruise!' repeated the Major. 'Welcome, welcome, welcome!'

'Such a lovely view,' Mrs. Bruise said.

'Yes, Mrs. Bruise, it is a lovely view, isn't it. Would you like to take your coat off? May I help you?'

'Thank you.'

'Not at all, not at all. Let me introduce you to someone, Mrs. Bruise. Through here, there we are. Am I wheeling you too fast, Mrs Bruise? No? That's good. Mrs. Bruise, this is Alistair. Our oldest guest. Our only guest in fact. But now that you've come we shall be much more cheerful, shan't we?'

In one corner of the room sat a peach-coloured old man, wrapped in innumerable blankets, clutching in one hand a crumpled souvenir guide to the Cheddar Gorge. He was learning how to integrate 1 tanze with respect to x, in black and white, but found time to nod at Mrs. Bruise.

'That's right, Mrs. Bruise. Much more cheerful. Would you care to see your room? It's upstairs. Next to Alistair's, in fact. Lovely view. You can walk a little, can't you, Mrs. Bruise?'

'A little, but it tires me.'

'That's good. Up we go then.'

The first thing Mrs. Bruise noticed about her room was the wall. She had been staring at it for quite some time before it really began to make her uneasy. It was completely bare except for a small, yellow-tiled fireplace that held an electric heater where there should have been a fire. The wall itself might once have been yellow or even white but was now smeared with a uniform, sickly grey. What it was about the thing which distressed her so much Mrs. Bruise could not begin to describe. She sat on the edge of the bed huddled in her tiny pink cardigan, with her damp little hands clenched together, staring at it till the nurse came to take her away for supper.

Mrs. Bruise could not stop thinking about her wall all evening. It coloured her conversation so that it seemed to her that she answered a disproportionate number of implausible questions about walls and to all Major Scritchwallow's polite enquiries replied with

unfaltering regularity, 'Greyness.'

Alistair was silent throughout the meal. It was only when they brought in the semolina that he was prompted to ask if Mrs. Bruise had ever been to the Cheddar Gorge. Mrs. Bruise replied rather tremulously that she had not.

'Mrs. Peg had been to Cheddar. She'd been there lots of times. Did you say you'd ever been to Cheddar, Mrs. Boose? I forget whether you said you had or not.' Mrs. Bruise shook her head again.

'Oh,' said Alistair and he was moodily silent again for a few minutes before continuing with, 'Mrs. Peg and I used to talk about the Cheddar Gorge a lot. Almost all the time. She'd been there, you see, and she used to knock on my door first thing in the morning and I'd say, 'Who is it?' and she'd say, 'It's me, Mrs. Peg, can I come in?' and then she'd come in and we'd have a little chat. Of course she was in that same room you've got now. The one next to mine, number four.'

Mrs. Scritchwallow looked as if she saw the express train coming for her. 'Not in the room next to yours, Alistair, that wasn't where Mrs. Peg lived. It was the one opposite, don't you remember?'

'Oh yes,' said Alistair, and wheezed.

'How old would you say Alistair was, Mrs. Bruise?' the Major asked suddenly.

'Really,' offered Mrs. Bruise, 'you don't look a day over . . .'

'Eighty-nine,' said Alistair triumphantly. 'I'll be ninety next June. Course, I can't get around like I used to. Artificial hips. But Mrs. Peg, now she was good at walking. Nothing artificial about her, she was all real. Even died standing up, you know. Went to the lavatory one day and when she didn't come back they found her dead with her hand on the door.'

After this unusually long speech, Alistair was stricken by a paroxysm of wheezing and relapsed into peachy silence for the rest of the evening.

'Oh,' said Mrs. Bruise after a pause. Then she added, 'I'm not old either, you know.'

'And don't look it, Mrs. Bruise, don't look it!'

'Only sixty grey,' Mrs. Bruise said. Then she became conscious of having made a mistake and was confused.

'I think I should like to go upstairs now.'

'Of course, Mrs. Bruise, you must be tired. How thoughtless of us. Why not use the chairlift, yes, use the chairlift, we have a chairlift you know!' said the Major.

She was escorted up to her room by Mrs. Scritchwallow and the express train while Major Scritchwallow stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted, 'Horlicks, Mrs. Bruise? Horlicks for you? And a ginger biscuit perhaps, if you're not too tired. Are you too tired to eat a ginger biscuit, Mrs. Bruise?'

At last Mrs. Bruise was sitting on her bed again. Staring at the wall through the gaps between her little pink fingers, she could now discern the source of her uneasiness, it was so obvious she could not imagine how she had come to miss it before. In the top right-hand corner of the wall, quite close to the ceiling, was a face. It was not a large face, about the size of a man's hand perhaps, and it was drawn without any great degree of skill, in thick black ink. It was clearly intended to be the face of a woman for it had long hair arranged in ringlets through which protruded ears of unusual size and shape, and on top of the head, where the hair was thickest, rose a pair of fine curling horns. The lips were quite obviously feminine, as were the large black eyes that seemed to follow one about the room. They were staring towards the bed now and at Mrs. Bruise sitting bolt upright with her limp pink cardigan clutched to her face.

After a while Nurse appeared with a mug of grey, over-sweet Horlicks and a single ginger biscuit on a pale blue plate.

Mrs. Bruise would have liked to tell her about the dreadful face but somehow the words seemed to stick in her throat. Had she been able to utter them they would in any case have been of little use with this huge clean large-handed woman with her wide, friendly bloodless face and thick pale lips. She left Mrs. Bruise with a garish blue copy of the New Testament in its newest form, and then turned out the light.

Mrs. Bruise drifted off to sleep that night to pink and white tablets and the sound of barking dogs.

At half-past eight the next morning, Major Scritchwallow appeared at the door in a pair of stained khaki trousers and an odd dark-coloured jumper that was much too small for him. The clothes gave his body a curiously misshapen air and he glided into the room

with a gait more suited to the pelvic girdle of a dinosaur brought to life than to any human being. He was carrying a steel tray with breakfast things on it and carrying it so that his tiny pink eyes were on a level with the spout of the willow pattern teapot.

'Good morning, Mrs. Bruise, lovely day.'

Mrs. Bruise clutched the bedclothes about her. 'It's raining,' she said.

'Oh, Mrs. Bruise, you haven't drunk up your Horlicks! Or eaten your ginger biscuit for that matter!'

'I didn't like the colour,' said Mrs. Bruise. She was afraid she had been rude but, if she had, Major Scritchwallow did not seem to have noticed it. He was putting the tray onto a small, peeling gold table by her bed and whistling to himself. Then he sat down on the edge of the quilt and looked at her without blinking until his eyes watered.

'Do you, ah, do you like the table, Mrs. Bruise?' He seemed to be under the impression that Mrs. Bruise was deaf for he raised his voice to a ridiculous level when speaking to her and pronounced each word with horrible distinction. 'Yes, I brought it back with me from India. Served out there for quite a while in my younger days. Nice piece, isn't it, Mrs. Bruise. Probably quite valuable.'

Mrs. Bruise had a vague idea that it was probably one of the nastiest and least expensive 'pieces' she had seen since her days at the vicarage but she only clenched her little hands together and, smiling, tried not to look at his eyes. There was a pause. 'Well, I won't keep you then,' Major Scritchwallow said. He got to his feet and Mrs. Bruise noticed he was wearing odd slippers, one purple velvet and one a bamboo-coloured cork-matting affair, both filthy.

'Oh, one moment, Major.'

He turned in the doorway to find Mrs. Bruise pointing with one trembling pink hand at the corner of the wall.

'Who did that?'

'What, Mrs. Bruise? Who did what?'

'The drawing.'

'Oh, you mean the face.' The Major let out a short, sharp, audible sigh which was his usual substitute for a laugh. 'That little thing? Why, that was Mrs. Peg's invention. She said it made the wall look a little less bare. It's supposed to be the Magdalene, I think, you know, Mary Magdalene? Staunch R.C. was Mrs. Peg,

big strapping woman, too, but you can tell that by looking at the picture. See how high up it is! Way above my head.'

'But what about the beard?' Mrs. Bruise insisted. 'The beard on the face, it wasn't there yesterday.'

'What was that, Mrs. Bruise?' Another loud sigh. 'Yes, a remarkable woman was Mrs. Peg. Marvellous red hair she had, down to her waist it was, yes indeed. Not real of course, she was quite bald underneath, but don't you go telling that to Alistair, will you! No. I'm sure you won't, Mrs. Bruise.'

'The beard.' Mrs. Bruise had a very small voice even when she wasn't terrified and probably the Major did not hear her.

'Anyway, I'll be getting on now. Nurse'll be here in a little while to help you dress.' He winked at her once and then he and his thin scarlet eyes slid soundlessly out of the room. Looking at herself in the mirror after he'd gone Mrs. Bruise noticed something rather alarming. She decided to go downstairs after breakfast to find Mrs. Scritchwallow and ask her advice.

Mrs. Scritchwallow and Nurse were sitting in front of a scabby-looking Indian screen listening to Radio 4. Nurse was knitting something small and knotted in purple wool and Mrs. Scritchwallow was eating marzipan with a teaspoon from a huge five-pound block. There was a distinct smell of diesel fumes about her.

'Mrs. Scritchwallow,' said Mrs. Bruise.

'Yes, dear?'

Mrs. Bruise came a little closer.

'What is it, lovey?'

And closer still until she could just whisper in Mrs. Scritchwallow's rather yellowish ear.

'Why yes, my dear, I think you are.' Mrs. Scritchwallow said loudly. 'Just a bit of a one.'

'What's that?' Nurse had a deep husky baritone voice rather like a bloodhound's.

'Mrs. Bruise thinks she's growing a beard,' Mrs. Scritchwallow informed her.

'A beard? Well, well, whatever next! We shall have to be buying you an electric razor soon, shan't we, Mrs. Bruise! Never mind, ducks, soon sort you out with a few hormones. Just leave it to Nurse.'

In the next room Alistair was sitting in front of the television

being fed Biblical Allegory by a well-spoken young man in horn-rimmed glasses. Alistair smiled at Mrs. Bruise as she came in and waved the Cheddar Gorge pamphlet at her. 'You should take a look at this, Mrs. Boose. Very interesting place is the Cheddar Gorge. My son works there, you know, in the caves. Mrs. Peg told me she'd actually seen him there once. Just fancy! It's such a small world, isn't it'.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Bruise.

'Of course, you haven't been to Cheddar Gorge, have you. But take a look at this anyway, you might find it interesting.'

Mrs. Bruise took the guide and thanked him. 'Were you . . .' she hesitated, 'were you good friends with Mrs. Peg?'

'Oh, she was a good woman was Mrs. Peg, a good woman. Very religious, mind you, always careful to remember to cross herself and not to tread on insects. A very good woman.'

The thought occurred to Mrs. Bruise that it was a strange kind of good woman who drew horns on the Magdalene, but she said nothing and as if in reply to her thoughts the well-spoken young man on the television said, 'Figural Allegory.'

'Ah, Figural Allegory, figural allegory,' murmured Alistair.

Mrs. Bruise tried again. 'Did Mrs. Peg . . .'

'Mrs. Bruise, Mrs. Bruise.' She jumped at a light bony touch on her shoulder. 'Not letting the ghost of Mrs. Peg trouble us again, are we?'

He advanced blinking into the room. The Major had a curious habit of preparing himself, whenever he entered a room, with a series of rapid blinks. He was then free to converse for the next four or five minutes without so much as a flicker.

'Of course not, Major,' said Mrs. Bruise, and the Major smiled at her.

She spent the rest of the day in solitude, staring passively at the face until it seemed to be grinning at her from beneath that thick Russian beard.

It rained very heavily that night. When Mrs. Bruise opened her eyes she could scarcely believe it was morning. Three melancholic crows were sitting on a large blue chimney opposite her window, croaking the semblance of a dawn chorus, and the sky was a deep, dying brown. Several tiles had blown off during the night and the

holes they left were like small dark mouths or eyes in the livid glistening of the rooftops. Major Scritchwallow was outside trying to retrieve some of the less damaged ones, treading the wet, brown grass in his odd slippers. He happened to look up as Mrs. Bruise came to the window and waved at her. 'Good morning, Mrs. Bruise, lovely day.'

Mrs. Bruise sat down in one of the bald green armchairs and stared once more at the face. Yesterday she had made Nurse turn all the furniture round so that she should never have to sit with her back to it and feel those ink-black eyes piercing into her soul. Today the face had grown a beauty spot. A small heart-shaped mole near the left-hand corner of the mouth. The grin she thought she had discerned yesterday was gone and in its place was a discreet coquettish smirk. The ears had grown too, so long that they had begun to entwine themselves around the horns like some stunted fleshy birdweed from tropical parts. 'It must be Nurse,' Mrs. Bruise thought. 'She must creep in here at night and do all this just to frighten me. She's the only one tall enough to reach. It must be her.'

As she came downstairs there were two skinny young men in black cheesecloth carrying a piano across the hall. A bleary-eyed Mrs. Scritchwallow stood in one of the adjoining doorways watching the proceedings and peeling a tomato with nervous fingers. She smiled at Mrs. Bruise and there were bits of tomato skin stuck to her teeth. There was a terrible noise of dogs.

'Ah, Mrs. Bruise,' the Major emerged startlingly behind her. He had his arms full of wet tiles and was soaked to the skin. Not for the first time, Mrs. Bruise was struck by the amphibian-like nature of his countenance. Now, with his wet grey hair clinging to and accentuating the curious, angular shape of his skull, she realised afresh that Major Scritchwallow was not a real person at all but a gigantic newt.

'The shed's started to leak, Mrs. Bruise,' he shouted, 'so I decided to bring the piano indoors! It'll be something to do of an evening anyway and maybe encourage you to come down a bit more, Mrs. Bruise! You really should, you know, it's no good staying up in that cold old lonely room of yours all the time. Do you play? No, neither do I. But there's the good thing about the pianola. No skill required in the playing of. Absolutely none! Just

pedal away and the old pedals, ye—es.' He gave one of his habitual abrupt sighs. 'Drat those dogs! Where's the noise coming from?'

He poked his head around the nearest door, 'Settle down now! Settle down,' and then retreated with a shrug. 'Not in there, can't imagine where it's coming from. Didn't know we had dogs as a matter of fact. Must be Nurse's. By the way, I hear you're growing a beard, Mrs. Bruise.'

The two young men looked round.

'Have to watch out, Mrs. Bruise. In the old days they'd have burned you for a witch!'

Mrs. Bruise did not come down in the evenings. She stayed in her room and watched the face. She could hear the pianola downstairs being played with tuneless rapidity and the wild, muffled thuds that meant that Nurse was dancing. Mrs. Bruise stood up slowly and went over to the small scaley wash-basin that occupied the darkest corner of the room. There was an old dishcloth on top of the fireplace with which Mrs. Scritchwallow had recently been pretending to dust. Mrs. Bruise picked it up and a large spider scuttled across the tiles and disappeared in the semi-miraculous way unique to its race. Mrs. Bruise whimpered a little and dropping the cloth into the basin, turned on the hot tap as hard as she could so as to both boil and drown any companion monsters. It was a slow progress to drag one of the chairs over to the wall and then stand on it, all the while in constant terror that Nurse should hear the noise. Standing on the chair and stretching her frail blue body to its utmost, Mrs. Bruise could just reach with one ancient hand to wipe away the face of the hateful Magdalene. She scrubbed until her hand ached and her little birdlike heart was painful. It happened, of course, as she had expected it would. Not a line of the saint's face could be washed away except for the small birthmark on the left cheek. Mrs. Bruise's legs crumpled beneath her, she sank to her knees, then toppled and fell with a soft thud to the floor.

Downstairs, the music and dancing stopped and a few seconds later Nurse appeared, red in the face with her hands full of hormones and tiny pink tablets, closely followed by Mrs. Scritchwallow and the express train.

'Oh, Mrs. Bruise,' said Nurse. 'Oh, Mrs. Bruise, what a silly thing to do!' She took the ancient bundle of clothes in her huge clean hands and attempted to bring it to its feet, but then leapt back

with a yell. 'Oh, Mrs. Bruise! What a naughty girl you are! Such sharp teeth!'

The following morning Mrs. Bruise was sitting looking at her picture as usual when the doorbell rang. She was no longer as terrified as she had been the night before. Nurse and the pink tablets had reduced her fear to a vague uneasiness, the texture of porridge or mild migraine. Even the discovery of a small mole on her left cheek did not distress her to any great degree.

The doorbell rang again and the dogs began to bark. There was a sound of the front door being opened and someone said, 'Mrs. Bruise in?'

'Certainly!' this from Major Scritchwallow.

'Arnold Bruise. Just popped along to see . . .'

'Mr. Bruise, come in, come in! Your mother's upstairs. I'll fetch her for you, come on in!'

Mrs. Bruise dressed herself as best she could, which was not very well, without any fine regard for detail, and hurried downstairs as fast as her trembling, emerald legs would carry her.

'Lucky Mrs. Bruise,' the Major was saying as she reached the landing, 'to have such charming visitors. Mr. and . . . Mrs. Bruise, is it?'

Hand in hand with Mr. Bruise was a large-boned, ugly woman with straight brown hair. She could have been any age from thirty to fifty but was probably about twenty-five. She was wearing a rectangular nylon costume in a colour that was not navy blue but produced the same effect, and her skin was very red. It went even redder as Major Scritchwallow said, 'Mrs. Bruise.'

Mr. Bruise coughed and said, 'This is Fiona.'

'Pleased to meet you. How d'you do!' shouted the Major and leaned forward at a dangerously acute angle.

Arnold Bruise stood back to let his companion enter. His hair and beard seemed thinner than on his last visit and in the cold morning light there was an ephemeral air to his appearance. The young woman shook hands with Major Scritchwallow as if she was the vicar and then followed him into the house. Arnold came after her with his head bent, wiping his feet very carefully on the mat. When he looked up Mrs. Bruise was standing quite close to him with a bright tearful smile on her usually flaccid face. He noticed

with some distaste that she had smeared dark pink lipstick in a thick, clownlike ring round her mouth.

'Hello, mother,' he said.

At that moment the dogs stopped their barking and Nurse appeared.

'Ah, Nurse! You've met Mr. Bruise, haven't you? Our Mrs. Bruise's son. And this is . . . I'm sorry I don't know your surname.'

'Scott,' said Miss Scott.

Nurse smiled broadly and shook their hands. Miss Scott again pretended to be the vicar.

'Ah, through here, I think. This is our . . . our sitting room. We've just bought a pianola as you can see,' crossing over to the instrument and lifting the lid. 'My wife and I enjoy a little music-making of an evening. So does Nurse come to that. In fact Nurse is quite a performer, aren't you, Nurse?'

'Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say that, Major.'

The Major gave another of his abrupt sighs. 'Haven't persuaded your mother to take a turn yet though, have we, Mrs. Bruise!' He laughed again and then there was a long silence in which Mr. Bruise and Miss Scott smiled at each other. 'Well then, I'll, ah, leave you to chat,' said the Major, clapping his hands together. 'Perhaps you'd like something to drink? Tea, coffee, vodka?'

'Tea would be lovely, thanks,' said Mr. Bruise. 'No milk or sugar.'

'Fine, fine, and what about you, Miss Scott?'

'Nothing for me, thank you,' said Miss Scott. 'It's Ash Wednesday today and I'm fasting.'

'Right,' said the Major. He drew the word out into one of his sighs, and repeated it several times to himself, under his breath.

'Tea for you and Nurse, Mrs. Bruise?'

'Please.'

He disappeared and the four of them were left in silence. It was desperately important to Mrs. Bruise that Nurse should leave the room but she was spread like a stone over most of the sofa and showed no signs that she would ever get up again.

Arnold Bruise coughed. 'Well, how are you, mother?'

'I'm very well, thank you, dear. How are you?'

'Fine, fine,' said Arnold, unconsciously echoing the tones of the Major.