

## On Saying 'Please'

A. G. Gardiner

Alfred George Gardiner (1865–1946) was one of the most distinguished essayists of the twentieth century. His essays are delightful, humorous and thought-provoking. Starting his career as a journalist, Gardiner wrote essays for *The Daily News* under the pen name 'Alpha of the Plough'. Later, he served as its editor between the years 1902 and 1919. He dealt skilfully with simple as well as serious subjects. Little acts of life acquire a new dimension under his adept pen. His essays appeared in volumes such as *Prophets, Priests and Kings* and *Pillars of Society* which contain funny sketches of famous personages.

### *About the essay*

'On Saying "Please"' is a thought-provoking comment on manners, presented in a humorous way. In an age where people become progressively hostile to one another, such an essay serves as an important reminder of the fact that bad manners are just as infectious as good manners and that it is up to each individual to keep in mind the 'little courtesies by which we keep the machine of life oiled and running sweetly'.

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**T**he young lift-man in a City office who threw a passenger out of his lift the other morning and was fined for the offence was undoubtedly in the wrong. It was a question of 'Please'. The complainant entering the lift, said, 'Top'. The lift-man demanded 'Top-please' and this concession being refused he not only declined to comply with the instruction, but hurled the passenger out of the lift. This, of course was carrying a comment on manner too far. Discourtesy is not a legal offence, and it does not excuse assault and

battery. If a burglar breaks into my house and I knock him down, the law will acquit me, and if I am physically assaulted, it will permit me to retaliate with reasonable violence. It does this because the burglar and my assailant have broken quite definite commands of the law, but no legal system could attempt to legislate against bad manners, or could sanction the use of violence against something which it does not itself recognize as a legally punishable offence. And whatever our sympathy with the lift-man, we must admit that the law is reasonable. It would never do if we were at liberty to box people's ears because we did not like their behaviour, or the tone of their voices, or the scowl on their faces. Our fists would never be idle, and the gutters of the City would run with blood all day.

I may be as uncivil as I may please and the law will protect me against violent retaliation. I may be haughty or boorish and there is no penalty to pay except the penalty of being written down an ill-mannered fellow. The law does not compel me to say 'please' or to attune my voice to other people's sensibilities any more than it says that I shall not wax my moustache or dye my hair or wear ringlets down my back. It does not recognize the laceration of our feelings as a case for compensation. There is no allowance for moral and intellectual damages in these matters.

This does not mean that the damages are negligible. It is probable that the lift-man was much more acutely hurt by what he regarded as a slur upon his social standing than he would have been if he had a kick on the shins, for which he could have got a legal redress. The pain of a kick on the shins soon passes away but the pain of a wound to our self-respect or our vanity may poison a whole day. I can imagine that lift-man, denied the relief of throwing the author of his wound out of the lift, brooding over the insult by the hour, and visiting it on his wife in the evening as the only way of restoring his equilibrium. For there are few things more catching than bad temper and bad manners. When Sir Anthony Absolute bullied Captain Absolute, the latter went out and bullied his man, Fag, whereupon Fag went out downstairs and kicked the page-boy. Probably the man who said 'Top' to the lift man was really only getting back on his employer who had not said 'Good morning' to him because he himself had been henpecked at breakfast by his wife, to whom

Fag - servant

giving  
treatm

bad - man

play  
char



the cook had been insolent because the housemaid had 'answered her back'. We infect the world with our ill humours. Bad manners probably do more to poison the stream of the general life than all the crimes in the calendar. For one wife who gets a black eye from an otherwise good natured husband there are a hundred who live a life of martyrdom under the shadow of a morose temper. But all the same the law cannot become the guardian of our private manners.

*code* No Decalogue could cover the vast area of offences and no court could administer a law which governed our social civilities, our speech, the tilt of our eyebrows and all our moods and manners.

*and* But though we are bound to endorse the verdict against the lift-man most people will have a certain sympathy with him. While it is true that there is no law that compels us to say 'Please', there is a social practice much older and much more sacred than any law which enjoins us to be civil. And the first requirement of civility is that we should acknowledge a service. 'Please' and 'Thank you' are the small change with which we pay our way as social beings. They are the little courtesies by which we keep the machine of life oiled and running sweetly. They put our intercourse upon the basis of a friendly cooperation an easy give and take, instead of on the basis of superiors dictating to inferiors. It is a very vulgar mind that would wish to command where he can have the service for asking, and have it with willingness and good feeling instead of resentment.

I should like to 'feature' in this connection my friend, the polite conductor. By this discriminating title, I do not intend to suggest a rebuke to conductors generally. On the contrary, I am disposed to think that there are few classes of men who come through the ordeal of a very trying calling better than bus conductors do. Here and there you will meet an unpleasant specimen who regards the passengers as his natural enemies - as creatures whose chief purpose on the bus is to cheat him, and who can only be kept reasonably honest by a loud voice and an aggressive manner. But this type is rare - rarer than it used to be. I fancy the public owes much to the Underground Railway Company, which also runs the buses, for insisting on a certain standard of civility in its servants and taking care that that standard is observed. In doing this it not only makes things pleasant for the travelling public, but performs an important social service.



It is not, therefore, with any feeling of unfriendliness to conductors as a class that I pay a tribute to a particular member of that class. I first became conscious of his existence one day when I jumped on to a bus and found that I had left home without any money in my pocket. Everyone has had the experience and knows the feeling, the mixed feeling, which the discovery arouses. You are annoyed because you look like a fool at the best and like a knave at the worst. You would not be at all surprised if the conductor eyed you coldly as much as to say, 'Yes I know that stale old trick. Now then, off you get.' And even if the conductor is a good fellow and lets you down easily, you are faced with the necessity of going back and the inconvenience, perhaps, of missing your train or your engagement.

Having searched my pockets in vain for stray coppers, and having found I was utterly penniless, I told the conductor with as honest a face as I could assume that I couldn't pay the fare, and must go back for money. 'Oh, you needn't get off: that's all right', said he. 'All right', said I, 'but I haven't a copper on me.' 'Oh I'll book you through,' he replied. 'Where d'ye want to go?' and he handled his bundle of tickets with the air of a man who was prepared to give me a ticket for anywhere from the Bank to Hong Kong. I said it was very kind of him, and told him where I wanted to go, and as he gave me the ticket I said, 'But where shall I send the fare?' 'Oh, you'll see me some day all right', he said cheerfully, as he turned to go. And then, luckily, my fingers, still wandering in the corners of my pockets lighted on a shilling and the account was squared. But that fact did not lessen the glow of pleasure which so good-natured an action had given me.

A few days after, my most sensitive toe was trampled on rather heavily as I sat reading on the top of a bus. I looked up with some anger and more agony, and saw my friend of the cheerful countenance. 'Sorry, sir', he said. 'I know these are heavy boots. Got 'em because my own feet get trod on so much, and now I'm treading on other people's. Hope I din't hurt you, sir,' He had hurt me but he was so nice about it that I assured him he hadn't. After this I began to observe him whenever I boarded his bus, and found a curious pleasure in the constant good nature of his bearing. He seemed to have an inexhaustible fund of patience and a gift for



making his passengers comfortable. I noticed that if it was raining he would run up the stairs to give someone the tip that there was 'room inside'. With old people he was as considerate as a son, and with children as solicitous as a father. He had evidently a peculiarly warm place in his heart for young people, and always indulged in some merry jest with them. If he had a blind man on board it wasn't enough to set him down safely on the pavement. He would call to Bill in front to wait while he took him across the road or round the corner, or otherwise safely on his way. In short, I found that he irradiated such an atmosphere of good temper and kindness that a journey with him was a lesson in natural courtesy and good manners.

What struck me particularly was the ease with which he got through his work. If bad manners are infectious, so also are good manners. If we encounter incivility most of us are apt to become uncivil, but it is an unusually uncouth person who can be disagreeable with sunny people. It is with manners as with the weather. 'Nothing clears up my spirits like a fine day', said Keats, and a cheerful person descends on even the gloomiest of us with something of the benediction of a fine day. And so it was always fine weather on the polite conductor's bus, and his own civility, his conciliatory address and good humoured bearing infected his passengers. In lightening their spirits he lightened his own task. His gaiety was not a wasteful luxury, but a sound investment.

I have missed him from my bus route of late; but I hope that only means that he has carried his sunshine on to another road. It cannot be too widely diffused in a rather drab world. And I make no apologies for writing a panegyric on an unknown bus conductor. If Wordsworth could gather lessons of wisdom from the poor leech-gatherer 'on the lonely moor,' I see no reason why lesser people should not take lessons in conduct from one who shows how a very modest calling may be dignified by good temper and kindly feeling.

It is a matter of general agreement that the war has had a chilling effect upon those little every day civilities of behaviour that sweeten the general air. We must get those civilities back if we are to make life kindly and tolerable for each other. We cannot get them back by invoking the law. The policeman is a necessary symbol and the law



is a necessary institution for a society that is still somewhat lower than the angels. But the law can only protect us against material attack. Nor will the lift man's way of meeting moral affront by physical violence help us to restore the civilities. I suggest to him, that he would have had a more subtle and effective revenge if he had treated the gentleman who would not say 'Please' with elaborate politeness. He would have had the victory, not only over the boor, but over himself, and that is the victory that counts. The polite man may lose the material advantage, but he always has the spiritual victory. I commend to the lift-man a story of Chesterfield. In his time the London streets were without the pavements of today and the man who 'took the wall' had the driest footing. 'I never give the wall to a scoundrel,' said a man who met Chesterfield one day in the street. 'I always do', said Chesterfield, stepping with a bow into the road. I hope the lift man will agree that his revenge was much more sweet than if he had flung the fellow into the mud.

### Glossary

<i>complainant</i>	:	a person who has made a complaint
<i>assault and battery</i>	:	a physical attack or threat
<i>legislate</i>	:	make laws
<i>retaliate</i>	:	return the same sort of ill-treatment that one has received
<i>boorish</i>	:	rough and bad-mannered
<i>laceration</i>	:	tearing or injuring
<i>equilibrium</i>	:	the state of being balanced and calm
<i>Sir Anthony Absolute</i>	:	a character in Sheridan's play <i>The Rivals</i>
<i>Captain Absolute</i>	:	the son of Sir Anthony Absolute
<i>Fag</i>	:	Captain Absolute's servant
<i>hen-pecked</i>	:	ruled by his wife
<i>Decalogue</i>	:	the Ten Commandments brought by Moses from Mount Sinai (Old Testament); they formed the basis of the Mosaic Law of the Israelites. Here, it refers to the moral code to be observed by man

<i>enjoin</i>	:	give an order; command
<i>feature</i>	:	offer as illustration
<i>ordeal</i>	:	any severe test of character or endurance
<i>calling</i>	:	(here) profession
<i>Underground Railway Company</i>	:	the company which managed the 'Tube' system of railways in London
<i>Bank</i>	:	a famous business quarter in London
<i>solicitous</i>	:	anxious, eager to do something
<i>benediction</i>	:	blessing
<i>panegyric</i>	:	piece of writing praising a person
<i>affront</i>	:	to be rude

## Exercises

### A. Answer the following questions in a sentence each.

1. Why did the lift-man throw the passenger out?
2. What is the limitation of the law when it comes to bad behaviour?
3. What, according to the author, has the potential to poison a whole day?
4. What, according to the author, 'keep the machine of life oiled and running sweetly'?
5. 'I found that he irradiated such an atmosphere of good temper and kindness'. Who is the author referring to here?

### B. Answer the following questions in about 30–40 words each.

1. What is the difference between a legal offence and a moral one? Substantiate your answer with examples.
2. What does Gardiner say about the social practice that 'enjoins us to be civil'? What are his views on civility and courtesies?
3. Describe Gardiner's first encounter with the polite bus conductor.
4. What examples does Gardiner use to prove that 'there are few things more catching than bad temper and bad manners'?
5. What 'subtle and effective' method does Gardiner suggest for dealing with people who lack good manners?



**C. Answer the following questions in about 150 words each.**

1. Describe the event that led Gardiner to reflect on the issue of politeness.
2. 'Bad manners probably do more to poison the stream of the general life than all the crimes in the calendar'. How does Gardiner establish this statement?
3. Write a short note on Gardiner's interactions with the polite bus conductor. What impact do you feel these encounters had on him?
4. What kind of effect did the war have on people? What does Gardiner advise his readers to do in order to make life 'kindly' again?