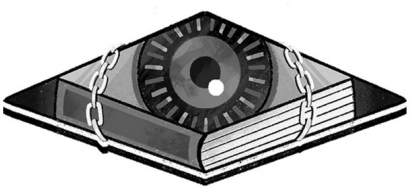
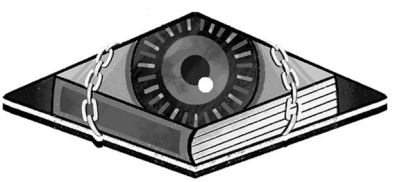
THE MINISTRY OF MANNERS



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DAVID SOLOMONS

ILLUSTRATED BY **HAZEM ASIF**

Piccadilly

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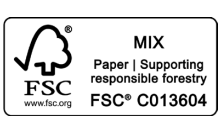
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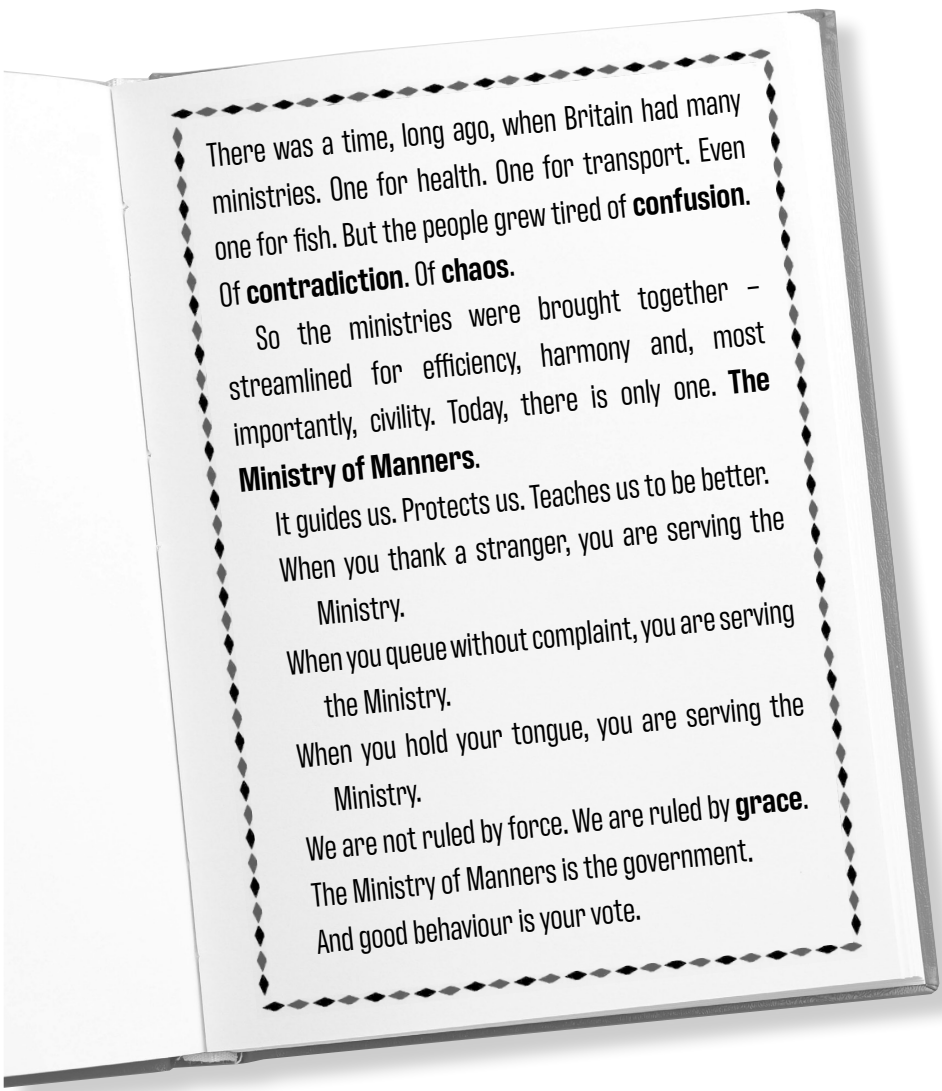
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For Luke Alfred and Lara Margot,
in recognition of their exemplary conduct
and unwavering civility.

From Understanding Our Government:
A Guide for Young Citizens

Issued by the Office of National Civility



There was a time, long ago, when Britain had many ministries. One for health. One for transport. Even one for fish. But the people grew tired of **confusion**. Of **contradiction**. Of **chaos**.

So the ministries were brought together – streamlined for efficiency, harmony and, most importantly, civility. Today, there is only one. **The Ministry of Manners**.

It guides us. Protects us. Teaches us to be better.

When you thank a stranger, you are serving the Ministry.

When you queue without complaint, you are serving the Ministry.

When you hold your tongue, you are serving the Ministry.

We are not ruled by force. We are ruled by **grace**.

The Ministry of Manners is the government.

And good behaviour is your vote.

‘A polite word is a happy day. Listening ears make friends stay. We move like a quiet, calm river, keeping our world neat and our voices whispers. A polite word is the guard of peace and order.’

The Child’s Courtesy Commitment



A POLITE WORD IS A HAPPY DAY



It was a warm, cheerful day in May, and the trees were recording every word.

Alfie Hawthorne stepped out of his house, adjusting the strap on his school bag, and called back through the open door, 'Margot, hurry up!'

'What's the rush?' Margot shouted from somewhere inside. There was a clatter, a thud, and then she emerged, one shoe half on, clutching a toast crust as if she'd just won a trophy. 'Besides, if we're late, it's on you – ancient big brother law. Look it up.'

The front door swooshed shut behind them with a soft, self-assured click, like it was tired of their morning chaos. Alfie waited as Margot hopped on one foot, wrestling her shoe into submission. Her straw boater sat on her head at a reckless angle. Her uniform looked like she'd slept in it, a stark contrast to his, pressed to a sharpness that could slice shadows.

She finally stood upright, victorious. Margot was twelve, a little over a year younger than him – but you'd never

know it from the way she charged at the world, all elbows and attitude.

A small scar peeked from her eyebrow – a memento from the time she'd tried to bathe the cat, and the cat had strongly disagreed.

That was before the Ministry banned pets, of course.

They shared the same hazel eyes, though hers sparkled with mischief, while his often searched for an escape route from her next scheme. To Alfie, she was a whirlwind personified, her light brown hair a tangled banner of rebellion. His hair lay flat and obedient, each strand a silent surrender to the morning comb. He glanced at his sister and couldn't help but think they were like two books from the same series – his the carefully preserved collector's edition, and Margot's the one that's been through every backpack and puddle in town.

Quick as a flash, she flicked his cap off his head. It tumbled through the air and landed with a soft plop on the pavement. She flashed him a grin.

'Come on, don't dawdle,' she called, skipping ahead. 'We'll be late.'

He bent to retrieve the cap, and with a shake of his head – half irritated, mostly amused – he jogged to catch up.

The journey to school was a zigzag of shadows and sunbeams, with Alfie herding his sister like a stray cloud through the clear blue of an otherwise perfect day. Margot skipped and twirled like she didn't see the drones at all, even though she knew they were there. They floated overhead like they were waiting for her to slip, their lenses glinting like sun on broken glass.



As they walked, she launched into a story – told with considerable dramatic flair – about how she'd outsmarted the C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y. home assistant, convincing it that 'fiddlesticks' was not a banned word. He smiled, genuinely, but his eyes never quite met hers. They kept flicking to the street cameras, the lamp posts with their satellite-dish tops, like metallic flowers, the benches with near-invisible mics under the armrests. Even the bins hummed faintly, retrofitted to detect more than just litter – sniffing out the murmurs of discarded conversations.

'And just like that,' she finished with a twirl, 'no Curtsey Coins deducted from my account.'

'Courtesy Coins,' he said, rolling his eyes.

The whole deal with Courtesy Coins was less like a game and more like being stuck in a maze designed by someone with a very polite stick up their backside. Everyone started off with a generous balance, tracked through the Ministry's app on your phone. Do something sweet like giving up your seat on the bus or not sniggering when Mr Jenkins' trousers split during assembly – and *ping* – you'd get a little richer. Mess up, though, toss out a 'blimey' at the wrong time or forget to plaster on a thank-you smile, and the system would zap those coins away faster than you could say 'fiddlesticks'.

It was like walking a tightrope, he reflected. Dip too low in Courtesy Coins and you didn't just miss out on party invites – you got lumped into the 'Might Benefit from Reflection' group in PE. Which was just a fancy way of saying 'Enjoy running laps till you're blue in the face'.



But the real kicker – the part that had kids whispering stories when the lights were out – was what would happen if your balance hit zero. Rumours floated around: stories of children being sent to a Manners Retreat – a place they came back from . . . *different*. Quieter. Eyes too wide, smiles too stiff.

Some said it was a camp where they scrubbed your mouth with soap for every curse, and made you write apology letters until your fingers bled. Others whispered about a room with nothing but a chair and a recording of polite phrases playing on repeat until you forgot how to speak like a real person.

As Alfie and Margot rounded the corner on to the high street, they were swept up into the morning tide – briefcases and satchels swirling like leaves in a breeze. Red pillar boxes stood at attention like guards from a bygone era. Shopfronts opened with cheerful efficiency, the air scented with fresh bread and strong tea.

Shopkeepers smiled, but their eyes gave nothing away. The cheer was for show – for the watchers. Digital ears and hidden lenses nestled in building facades and flower baskets, always listening.

They passed Mr Henderson, the grocer, who waved from his doorway, his smile as crisp as the apples stacked in pyramids beside him. 'Beautiful day, isn't it, children?'

'Absolutely, Mr Henderson!' Alfie replied, politeness dialled to the right setting.

The usual morning crowd was on the move – women in smart dresses, men in suits, heads topped with hats, as if

trilbies and fedoras might keep their thoughts neatly tucked in. Feet moved briskly, purposefully, in step with the hum of C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y. speakers droning the daily affirmations: '*Politeness paves the path to perfection. Every kind word builds a stronger society.*'

Alfie and Margot continued towards school, dodging the occasional red double-decker. Only buses – and the sleek cars bearing the Ministry's crest – were permitted to disturb the peace.

As they wove through the crowd, Alfie's gaze caught on a pair of Custodians on patrol. Their uniforms were all crisp lines and polished buttons – bowler hats, pressed collars, shoes that shone like signal flares. The kind of thing he'd seen in old history books, back when uniforms were meant to look respectable. But there was nothing quaint about them now. Their belts bristled with gadgets that looked more secret agent than civil servant, and their eyes, hidden behind dark visors, tracked every movement. They didn't carry guns – just gleaming truncheons, calibrated to stun, blind or disorient, depending on how impolite you'd been.

'Act natural,' he muttered to Margot as the Custodians approached, a line so ridiculous it would've been funny, if it weren't necessary.

They sidestepped closer to the shopfronts, as if examining the pastries in Mrs Bingley's bakery window might make them invisible.

The Custodians' boots tapped on the cobbles. One tipped his hat as they passed. Friendly on the surface, but the message was clear: *we're watching.*



Margot glanced up at her brother with a grin. 'Are you pondering what I'm pondering?' she said, echoing a silly routine from a cartoon their dad used to tell them about, before the Ministry banned anything too spontaneous – or too fun.

A mock-serious expression clouded Alfie's face. 'I think so, but isn't wearing socks on our hands just mittens with extra steps?'

Margot chuckled. 'Good one.'

They passed the last of the high street shops. In the distance, perched like a watchful guardian, the Ministry of Manners loomed, its silhouette cut against the morning sky – grand, imposing and utterly inescapable. It wasn't just a ministry. It was *the* Ministry – the seat of government, of law, of consequence.

Arabella Sweetly, First Minister of Manners, was said to work in an office at the very top. Some whispered she didn't sleep – only watched.

The building listened. It remembered. And it never forgave. The freedom to be children – with scraped knees and whispered secrets – felt smaller under its shadow.

Alfie felt it and pulled Margot a little closer.

'Remember,' he whispered to her as they approached Primrose Academy (*Where Courtesy Blooms into Success!*), 'smiles on, eyes down and no talk of fiddlesticks.'

'I'll try,' she said, 'but it's such a lovely word.'

As they reached the school gates, student chatter faded to a murmur. The gates were ornate ironwork, with sleek surveillance cameras perched like birds of prey on top.



Caught in the stream of uniforms and backpacks, they pushed through the entrance.

A girl in pigtails edged closer to Margot. Alfie recognised her as Hattie, one of the few girls who still talked to his sister. There weren't many left. Most of Margot's friends had peeled away over time, worn down by warnings and whispered advice.

'Did you finish the worksheet on regional hat etiquette?' Hattie asked, clutching her satchel like a shield. 'Miss Arkwright said she'd double the coin fine for sloppy handwriting.'

Margot raised an eyebrow. 'Tell her my penmanship died for a noble cause.'

They were almost through the gates when an older boy barged past, his shoulder clipping both girls and knocking Margot's straw boater clean off.

'Whoa there, Captain Elbows!' she snapped. 'Personal space ever ring a bell?'

The school yard fell silent.

'*Impolite expression detected: Margot Hawthorne*,' a disembodied voice intoned. '*Courtesy Coins deducted: five*.'

Margot's cheeks flushed. She glared at the boy, but he just smirked and walked on.

Hattie said nothing. She stepped back, just enough to make it clear: Margot was on her own.

Alfie winced and reached for her arm. She shook him off, chin high, and then pulled out her phone. The screen lit up with a cheerful animation that was anything but: a cartoon Margot – far more apologetic than the real one –



watching her coin stack melt away.

She snorted, half amused, half defiant. ‘Oh no, my coins! How ever will I buy my unicorn now?’ she said.

Hattie gave a breath of a laugh, then looked down quickly, as if ashamed of it.

Some of the other kids smiled too, but just as swiftly looked away. Their phones, like Margot’s, were a compulsory companion no one wanted. Part spy, part snitch, a constant reminder that ‘alone’ was just a myth in their pockets.

Alfie glanced at his own phone, the screen dark but undoubtedly listening, and felt a twinge of something fierce in his chest. It wasn’t fair, none of it, but indignation was a luxury in a world where even your shadow wasn’t yours to command.





The assembly hall was a flat sea of grey – rows and rows of children, each one slotted into place like files in a cabinet. They sat motionless, silent, as if their voices had been collected at the door. Teachers stood at the end of each row, eyes sweeping like searchlights, catching every fidget and flutter.

Up front, the giant screen flickered to life, and there she was, Arabella Sweetly, the First Minister of Manners, her perfectly polished face beaming down at them.

To Alfie, her face was like the front cover of every rule book he'd ever had to memorise, and her words were the soundtrack of every moment spent watching his – and everyone else's – manners.

'Manners,' she began, 'are the very fabric of our society. Without them, we are but savages pretending at civilisation. Our arsenal should be stocked with empathy and understanding, so that we may disarm conflict and cultivate peace. To speak without hurting is not just an act of compliance, but an act of courage.'



Alfie nodded along, but then a sudden snicker cut through Arabella's syrupy voice. Margot, careful to pitch her whisper just below the teachers' hearing but loud enough to ripple sideways, murmured, 'Do you reckon her teeth are that white from brushing or just the glare of her own halo?'

Alfie's heart sank into his stomach.

Amid the muffled giggles, he noticed one student – a girl he didn't recognise – staring hard at his sister. The new girl's hair was pulled back so tightly it seemed to tug at her eyebrows. She glowered at Margot, her eyes glinting with an intensity that made Alfie sit up straighter.

'Manners maketh the citizen,' Arabella declared, her voice rising just enough to fill the hall. 'And in a well-mannered society, there is no room for chaos, for cruelty or for those who think themselves above the rules.' She paused, letting the silence settle like dust. 'You are the future. Be worthy of it.'

A respectful patter of applause tiptoed through the hall, subdued and orderly. But the new girl shot up from her spot like a jack-in-the-box, hands clapping so fast it looked like she was trying to start a fire. All around, kids stopped applauding just to stare. Even the teachers looked taken aback.

Alfie felt a quiet alarm go off somewhere in his mind. She stuck out like a sore thumb, showing off how much she loved the speech. That kind of display made him nervous – as if she was daring everyone else to match her, or pay the price.

'Isn't she just brilliant?' the girl announced, voice ringing

with bright conviction. 'One day, I hope to emulate the minister's elegance and poise!'

Alfie made a mental note to keep his sister far away from this girl.

At a command from the teaching staff, the students rose in unison and began to exit.

He slipped into the stream, scanning the crowd until he spotted Margot. She was easy to find – shoulders back, jaw set, marching like someone who'd just lost one argument but intended to win the next.

As he caught up with her, she muttered, 'Can you believe that drivel?' loud enough for a few heads to turn. '*Manners maketh the citizen?* Ha. More like drones maketh the dimwits.'

'Margot!' Alfie shot her a panicked look. 'Not with Little Miss I Heart Rules around.'

'Her? She's probably got her room wallpapered with pictures of Sweetly,' Margot snickered.

Alfie wasn't smiling. 'Just steer clear, OK?' he said. 'She's the kind you need to watch out for.'

The crowd thickened near the exit, bodies pressing forward. Alfie felt a sudden jolt from behind and stumbled, crashing into someone. They both went down in a tangle – books flying like startled pigeons. He scrambled upright, already apologising. 'Oh no, I'm so –'

Then he saw her.

The new girl.

'Watch where you're going!' she snapped, her face thunderous.

'I didn't mean to –'

'What's your name?' Her eyes drilled into his.

'Alfie,' he stammered. 'Alfie Hawthorne . . . and I really didn't –'

'Alfred Hawthorne,' she repeated, dusting off her skirt. 'I'll remember that. And I'd advise you to be more careful. Next time, I might not be so understanding.'

With that, she marched off, leaving him to stare after her. That girl was trouble with a capital T.





The library was as silent as a classroom right after someone talked back. The walls were a patchwork of posters, each one beaming with Ministry slogans like *Kind Words, Kind World* and *Shelve Noise, Check Out Courtesy*.

Alfie trailed a finger along the spines of books that hinted at danger and daring, but the thrill had been carefully cut away. He plucked one from the shelf, flipping it open only to find that whole pages were blanked out as 'unsuitable content', leaving stories as holey as Swiss cheese.

Mrs Clara Finch, the librarian, stood beside a trolley of 'approved' classics. She was a slight woman with oversized spectacles that magnified her sharp eyes. Her scarf – bright and chaotic – seemed to protest the room's grey stillness. She clapped her hands, a soft sound that still brought all eyes to her.

'Who's ready for an adventure?' she asked. 'Now, this one,' she began, holding up a book whose cover promised a swashbuckling tale on the high seas. 'It's about a . . . very polite pirate. Yes, a pirate who says "please" and "thank you"

as he, um, navigates the complexities of maritime etiquette.' Her mouth twitched in a not-quite smile, and Alfie noticed how she avoided mentioning plundering, sword fights or the joy of a life unshackled by society's rules.

Next, she picked up a novel about a garden, her description dancing around the transformative magic of the hidden space, but never quite touching on the untamed emotions and tangled growth that mirrored the characters' journey. 'It's about children who learn to, well, to cultivate their . . . sense of cooperation.' Her eyes darted to the C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y. monitor perched high on the wall, its ice-blue light blinking like a dragon's eye.

Then there was a detective story, a tale of intrigue and intelligence, where the hero's brilliant deductions were watered down to 'He's very good at noticing when people don't use their indoor voices'. Mrs Finch faltered for just a second, her smile stiff.

'And this –' she picked up a book bound in what once might have been a vibrant red – 'is a story about a group of young students who, uh, who learn the value of punctuality and orderly lines through a series of . . . school-time misadventures.' The book was about much more – magic and mayhem in a boarding-school setting. Alfie knew that because Grandma had once started reading them a copy she wasn't meant to have, before Mum stopped her. Mrs Finch's hands were tied by the Ministry's rules.

Alfie listened, both amused and a little sad, as the librarian tiptoed through the minefield of approved adjectives, careful not to let anything sound too interesting.

As his eyes moved from one gutted adventure to the next, the library door swung open. The new girl strode in, chin high like she owned the place.

'Good morning, everyone,' she said. 'I'm Ivy Linwood, your new library monitor.'

She tapped the badge on her lapel. It showed a book with a bold line through it. Beside it sat a second badge: M.Y.T.H. – Ministry Youth for Truth and Honour. Everyone knew them as the Junior Judgers.

Mrs Finch blinked behind her glasses. 'Well, that's . . . splendid,' she said.

Without missing a beat, Ivy's gaze landed on a book in Mrs Finch's trolley. 'Mrs Finch, isn't that title on the revised list of forbidden reading? Section five, paragraph three of the C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y. code is clear: *No literature that contains themes of insubordination, disrespect or mischievous behaviour shall be permitted for student access*.'

The colour drained from the librarian's cheeks as she quickly pulled the book back. 'Of course, my apologies. A s-simple oversight,' she stammered.

Ivy's smile flickered. 'I understand, Mrs Finch, but we can't be too careful, can we? That's why I'll be conducting a full assessment of the library's inventory. We must ensure everything here reinforces the Ministry's standards.'

Mrs Finch forced a tight-lipped smile and retreated to her desk, moving like a wounded animal. Around the room, students exchanged uneasy glances. Ivy stood taller. The library badge on her chest caught the light, gleaming like a medal for obedience. She turned to face the class,



eyes bright with purpose. 'Since there's going to be a full inventory assessment, according to rule 7.1.4, students must vacate the library during this procedure. Please leave in an orderly fashion.'

The students began to shuffle out in silence. Alfie started to pack up his bag when Ivy's voice halted him.

'Alfred Hawthorne,' she called. 'Stay where you are.' He froze. 'By the power of the Ministry Youth for Truth and Honour, I deputise you to assist me in this task.'

Alfie braced himself as Ivy approached. She pulled a second badge from her pocket; not the red one she wore, but a smaller grey version. A sealed book, stamped in silver, its cover bound shut with a padlock. She handed it to him like it was an honour. He felt the stares of his classmates – pity mixed with relief that it wasn't them. Ivy pinned the badge to his blazer. Her face was inches from his, close enough for him to see the zeal in her eyes.

He glanced at Mrs Finch. She gave a small, almost invisible nod – her way of saying, *You've got this.*

'Well, then,' Ivy said. 'Let's get started.'



SHELVE NOISE

CHECK OUT COURTESY