The Perfect Smile

By J. D. Beresford

The realization of it first came to Douglas Owen when he was not quite five years old.

From his babyhood he had been spoilt, more particularly by his father. He could be such a charming little boy, and his frequent outbreaks of real naughtiness were overlooked or gently reproved. They were even admired in private by his parents, who regarded these first signs of disobedience, temper, and selfishness as the marks of an independent and original spirit.

Nevertheless, when Douglas was nearly five years old, he achieved a minor climax that the most indulgent father could not overlook. Despite all warnings and commands, Douglas would steal from the larder. When there were cakes or tarts he took those for preference, but when there was nothing else he would steal bread, merely, as it seemed, for the pleasure of stealing it. His father had protested to his mother that everything should be kept under lock and key, but as Mrs. Owen explained: "You can't expect a cook to be for ever locking things up." And the little Douglas was ingenious in his depredations. He chose his moment with cunning. Also he knew, as the cook herself confessed, how 'to get round her.'

Mr. Owen, who was a tender-hearted idealist, admitted at last that stern measures were called for, and he took Douglas into his study and remonstrated with him gently, even lovingly, but with great earnestness. The remonstrance gained strength from Mrs. Owen's fear that Douglas might make himself seriously ill by his illicit feastings. Douglas, who was forward for his age, listened with attention to his father's serious lecture and promised reform. "I won't do it again, father. Promise," he said with apparent sincerity. And his father, believing absolutely in his child's truthfulness, and remembering his wife's adjuration to be "really firm," was tempted to clinch the thing once for all by issuing an ultimatum.

"I'm sure you won't, little son," he said, "because you see if you did, daddy would have to whack you. He'd hate doing it, but he'd have to do it all the same."

Douglas's expression was faintly speculative. He had heard something like this before, from his mother.

"But you've promised faithfully that you'll never, never take anything out of the larder, or the kitchen, or the pantry again, haven't you, darling?" Mr. Owen persisted, by way of having everything quite clear.

"Promised faithfully," agreed Douglas; parted from his father with a hug of forgiveness; and was found a quarter of an hour later in the larder, eating jam with a spoon from a newly-opened jar.

"You threatened to whack him if he didn't keep his promise, and you must do it," Mrs. Owen said firmly to her husband. "If you don't keep your promises, how can you expect him to keep his?"

"Damn!" murmured Mr. Owen with great intensity.

"I shall bring him in and leave him with you," his wife said, correctly interpreting her husband's method of reluctantly accepting the inevitable.

Douglas was brought, and it was evident that on this occasion he was truly conscious of sin and apprehensive of the result. All his nonchalance was gone from him. He did not cry, but his eyes were wide and terrified. He looked a thoroughly guilty and scared child.

Mr. Owen hardened his heart. He thought of the contempt shown for his authority, of the wilfully broken promise, and of the threat to his son's future unless he were made to realise that sin cannot go unpunished.

Mrs. Owen, looking at her husband's stern face, was satisfied that justice would be done.

And then, when father and son were alone and sentence had been pronounced, the smile came for the first time.

Douglas did not know why or how it came. He was only conscious of it as something that illuminated his whole being, put him among the angels, and gave him immunity from all earthly terrors.

To his father, the smile was simply blinding. It was so radiant, so tender, forgiving, and altogether godlike. It condescended to his weakness and mortality, and made him feel how unworthy he was of such splendid recognition. His little son's face glowed with a perfect consciousness of power, and yet he seemed to surrender himself with a dignified humility to this threatened infamy of corporal punishment. Moreover, it was a smile that expressed the ultimate degree of innocence. It was impossible for anyone who saw it to believe that Douglas could have sinned in perversity, or with any evil intention.

And there was one other amazing peculiarity about this rare smile of Douglas's, for it not only permeated the finer feelings of those who witnessed it, but was also reflected weakly in their faces, as the outer and larger rainbow reflects the intensified beauty of the inner.

So now Mr. Owen's smile faintly echoed his son's.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," said Douglas confidently.

And Mrs. Owen waiting outside, listening in tremulous agitation for the wail that should announce her husband's resolution, heard no sound. And presently Douglas came out, still wearing the last pale evidences of his recent halo.

"But why didn't you?" Mrs. Owen asked her husband, when their son was out of earshot. She would have overlooked the essential omission, almost with gratitude, if she had not believed it her duty to reprove her husband's characteristic weakness.

"He—he smiled," Mr. Owen said.

"But Harold!" his wife protested.

Mr. Owen wrinkled his forehead and looked exceedingly distressed. "I don't know that I can explain," he said. "It wasn't an ordinary smile. I've never seen him do it before. I—I have never seen anything like it. I can only say that I would defy anyone to punish him when he smiled like that."

"I noticed as he came out. . . ." began Mrs. Owen.

"It was practically over then," her husband interrupted, and added with a slightly literary turn of speech he sometimes adopted: "That was only the afterglow."

But it is worth recording that, from that time, Douglas, although he was naughty enough in other ways, never robbed the larder again.

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Nine years passed before Douglas's great gift was once more manifested.

There was undoubtedly something unusually charming about the boy that protected him from punishment; and as he had been spoilt by his father at home, so was he also treated rather too leniently at school. But Dr. Watson, his headmaster, came at last to the end of his weakness.

Douglas was becoming a bad influence in the school. His careless evasions of discipline set an example of insubordination that was all too readily followed by the other boys.

Dr. Watson braced himself to the inevitable. In his heart be regretted the necessity, but he knew that Douglas must be sacrificed for the good of the school. He had been warned and mildly punished a hundred times. Now he must pay the full penalty.

The choice lay between expulsion and a public flogging, and when Douglas chose the latter, Dr. Watson resolved that the flogging should be of unusual severity. When the whole school was assembled, he made a very earnest and moving speech, deploring the causes that had given rise to the occasion, and showing how inevitable was the disgraceful result.

Douglas, white and terrified, made ready in a trembling silence, then, turning his back on the tensely expectant audience, he faced his headmaster.

Arthur Coburn, Douglas's humanitarian house-master, was so upset by these preliminaries that for one moment he was tempted to leave the hall. Corporal punishment had always seemed to him a horrible thing, but never had it seemed quite so revolting as on this occasion. Yet he fought against the feeling. He knew that his chief was neither a stern nor a cruel man, and had been driven into the present position by the sheerly impudent persistence of Douglas's disobedience. By way of alleviating as far as possible his own nervous distress, therefore, Coburn took up a position with his back to the rostrum, and faced the great crowd of just perceptibly intimidated boys.

And waiting, much as Douglas's mother had waited in shamed anxiety some nine years before, Coburn was amazed to see a sudden and incomprehensible change in the massed faces before him. The tensity, the look of half eager, half apprehensive expectation strangely relaxed. A wave of what looked like relief ran back in a long ripple of emotion from the front to the back of the many ranks of watching boys. In one instant everyone was wearing a faint smile of almost holy serenity.

Coburn turned with a leap of astonishment and stared at Dr. Watson. And the smile he saw on the headmaster's face outshone that on the faces of his audience as the sun outshines the moon.

But no one save Dr. Watson saw the perfect radiance that flowed out from the face of Douglas Owen.

"I'm sorry, sir," was all that Douglas said.

Dr. Watson dropped his birch as if it had burnt him.

His second address to the school was hesitating and apologetic. He tried to explain that when the clear signs of repentance and of reform were so evident as they were in the case of Owen, corporal punishment was superfluous and would be little short of criminal. Yet even Coburn, who so profoundly agreed with the principle expounded, found the explanation unsatisfying. He could not help feeling that Dr. Watson was concealing his true reason.

Nevertheless, it is well to note that after this reprieve Douglas passed the remainder of his school-life without committing any other serious offence.

He was only thirty-two when he came before the last and most terrible tribunal possible in our society.

After he left Cambridge, he was taken into a city office by a friend of his father's. Everyone liked him, and he might have made an excellent position for himself if he had not led such a loose life out of business hours. He seemed unable to resist any temptation, and the inevitable result was that he got into debt.

When his father's friend discovered the extent of Douglas's thefts from the firm, he had no choice but to dismiss him; although for the young man's sake not less than for the sake of his friendship with his father, he never even threatened prosecution.

For a time Douglas lived at home. Later he went to Canada for a couple of years. Then his father died, leaving him some five or six thousand pounds, and he came home again—to spend it. When that money was all gone, he lived on the charity of his many friends. They all knew him for an incorrigible scamp, but he still retained much of his old charm.

The crime for which he came at last to be tried for his life at the Old Bailey was too disgraceful an affair to be reported in detail. The only possible defence was that Douglas was unquestionably drunk when the murder was actually committed. Yet despite the weakness of the case for the defending counsel, everyone in court including the jury and possibly even Lord Justice Ducie himself, could not restrain a feeling of sympathy for the prisoner. He had not lost, despite all his excesses, his engaging air of ingenuous youth. And his manner throughout the trial naturally evoked a strong sense of pity.

The jury did all they could for him by bringing in a verdict of manslaughter.

The judge leaned forward with a kindly, almost fatherly air, as he asked the prisoner if he had anything to say in his own defence.

And at that supreme moment, as he stood white and terrified in the dock, Douglas was aware that once more, for the third time in his life, that wonderful glow of power, peace, and condescension was beginning to thrill through him.

He straightened himself and raised his head. He looked the judge in the face. He believed that the perfect smile had come again to save him. But he looked in vain for the old response.

The judge's mouth had twitched as Douglas looked at him, and for one instant all those who were waiting so anxiously for the pronouncement of the sentence were astounded to see a look of horrible bestiality flicker across the face of the old man who was accounted the most gentle and philanthropic judge who had ever sat in the criminal court. It was only a momentary impression, for Lord Ducie at once put both hands before his face as if to shut off the sight of some terrible infamy; but Bateson, the defending counsel, who was watching the judge, says that he never afterwards could quite recover his old respect for him.

It is unquestionably true that the hideous, depraved, and insulting grimace which had so unexpectedly revealed the soul of Douglas Owen, was solely responsible for the maximum sentence of twenty years' penal servitude that was imposed upon him.

If a man continually flouts the angels of grace, he must expect at last to be delivered over to the devil he so devotedly serves.