

Power of a Smile



Willow Green was the one store in the small chain of supermarkets which Anthony had not yet visited since he had become a director of the company. This store always seemed to run quite trouble-less with good figures and well met targets and problems in other places took up all his time. While he did not agree with surprise visits, he was in the area and it was an opportunity to meet the staff in an informal way. He decided he should introduce himself straightaway so as not to give the impression he was snooping. However, there was no time for that. No sooner had he got through the automatic doors and smelled that mixed scent of perfumed sweetness, smoked bacon and fresh bread, than he heard a child's shrill shriek, followed by a woman's reprimand, 'Debbie, come back here,' and then a fearful clatter which could only be falling tins and boxes. It was concluded with a loud tearful wail and the sound of fast moving feet.

Anthony walked across the top of the aisles in front of the checkout tills until he could see what had happened. It was quite obvious. The child, Debbie, had run away with a trolley several times her size and pushed it into a display shelf, bringing tins and packets and the trolley, down all around her. Her mother, three assistants and the manager all arrived at the same time. The manager picked up the howling Debbie and gave her to her mother. 'Bring her down to the office,' the manager said with a smile. 'We'll get our first-aider to check her out for cuts or bruises.'

The assistants were already picking up the fallen items and putting them into the trolley. At first Anthony was a little irritated by their obvious amusement at what had happened, but then wondered that they were laughing rather than annoyed at the extra work and intrusion into their routine. He knew which of the two attitudes he would have adopted. He left the manager to deal with the mother and child and spent a few minutes simply getting the 'feel' of the store. It was different.

It had a good warm atmosphere. Assistants worked together, joking with one another, yet unusually attentive to customers. Nothing seemed a bother. One elderly man had his shopping transferred to another trolley for him when it was obvious he couldn't steer the one he had chosen. A customer requesting help was personally conducted to find what they needed. A pleasant chatter at the till was just enough to keep the line moving. That happened in most stores Anthony reflected with pleasure, but still there was something more here. He could not put his finger on it.

When he reached the manager's office, Debbie was still munching a chocolate biscuit and sipping lemonade. Her mother had finished her cup of tea and was urging Debbie to eat up. Anthony introduced himself, assuring the manager that this was just a casual, off the record visit. Back in the store, Anthony had to ask about the atmosphere he had noticed.

'You're not the first one to note that by a long way,' Richard told him. 'And it's not just in the store with the customers. We're like a family here. Rachel was off work with a bad back last week and several of the staff were round at her place doing all sorts to help her. John who comes in to stock shelves lost his wife last year and you wouldn't believe how everybody here rallied round to help him. I could give you a whole long list like that. Mind you, don't go thinking it's heaven in here all the time. We have our off days, but we always come up smiling. Jean make's sure of that. Sometimes I think we're more like a hospital than a store.'

'Jean ?' asked Anthony

'Yes. I don't take credit for the way the store is,' Richard explained. 'It's Jean really. She's been working on the floor here since the store opened over fifteen years ago. I'd introduce her but she's not in today.'

'But what does Jean do that makes the difference ?'

'I wish she was here to tell you,' said Richard. 'She does that far better than me. It's her smile really. But I'll start at the beginning. It was a few years back now. Jean's husband was in the hospice - dying with cancer. They were a real couple. Just the two of them. No family. Jean was crying by his bed a couple of days before the end. She says he gripped her hand, looked up at her and said, 'Where's your smile ? Jean, whatever happens, don't stop smiling.' She says it was because he read somewhere about Mother Teresa talking about the power of a smile.

And that's what she did. I was here at the time. We're the longest serving in the store. Some days some little thing would happen or someone say something and it would touch her. Then you'd see her literally forcing a smile past her tears. After that she became known as Jean with the smile. Some of the girls, when there was any sort of trouble used to say, 'Smile for Jean'. Her smile was contagious. Somehow it bred kindness and caring. Jean was like that anyway. Her smile is like her signature really. We weren't aware what was happening at the time, but looking back we see how the whole atmosphere in the store gradually changed, and as I say, we became a sort of family. Even now, new employees soon slip in to our way and most of them, though not all, become 'family'.'

'There's something quiet and powerful about Jean,' Richard added. 'She's always talking about what her church priest says. Last week she told us he'd said, 'Walk a happy road and you take a whole lot of others with you into a world of happiness.' That's Jean.'

There was a long pause, almost a quiet moment amid the background noise of the store and the hum of the refrigerator behind them. 'I'm glad I called in.' There was nothing else Anthony could say. But it echoed the feelings of a good many customers.

