

“ A tear-away Prussian lad

Nine-year-old George carefully pushed open the wooden door, trying not to let it creak on its hinges. As his eyes quickly scanned the study he was relieved to see no one was there. Although he knew he was alone, he still moved swiftly towards his father's desk.

A small sum of money had been carelessly left lying on the brown leather top. He eyed it eagerly. It wasn't that he had any need of it, his father always provided for him very well. What attracted him was the thrill of stealing and getting away with it. George Müller was beginning to regard himself as an expert in the art of theft.

The next problem was where to put the money. His pockets were too obvious a place; he might pull out the coins by mistake. Then he had an idea. As quickly as possible he untied the laces of his left shoe and placed the money between his sock and shoe.

He wasn't a moment too soon. Barely had he finished retying the lace, when his father strode into the room.

'George, what are you doing here?'

'Er, looking for a book, father.'

His father, an austere Prussian gentleman, glanced towards the desk.

'Where is the money that I left lying here?'

George moved slowly across the room; he couldn't walk very quickly with the coins trapped inside his shoe.

'Money, father? I didn't see any money.'

'Turn out your pockets, boy.'

Smugly, George turned out his school-boy trivia, a pen-knife, yesterday's grubby handkerchief, some polished stones and a certain amount of fluff. There was no money in his pockets at all.

'Shoes and socks off, boy.'

'But father, I haven't seen your money.'

'Off!'

As the left shoe was reluctantly removed, the missing coins rolled noisily across the polished floor.

George knew the punishment would be a severe beating, but that wasn't going to stop him stealing. He would just have to find cleverer ways of covering up his crimes.

On that day, in Prussia, Herr Müller couldn't have known that his nine-year-old thieving son would become one of the best known philanthropists of the 19th century and the benefactor of thousands of orphaned children in a far off country. But that would all be God's doing.

The 21st October, 1805, saw the Battle of Trafalgar, where Napoleon lost his fight to conquer the rest of Europe. Three weeks before this great historical event, an event of much lesser importance took place in the tiny Prussian village of Kroppenstaedt, near Halberstadt. On the 27th September 1805, a son, George, had been born to Herr and Frau Müller.

Herr Müller was a tax collector and within four years the family moved to Heimersleben about four miles away. George was to be the eldest of two sons born into the family and his father's favourite; a fact which was to undermine any good character he might have developed.

Prussia had been a nation of grandeur, royalty and nobility under a central German governmental rule. The country contained the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. Over the centuries deep political struggles had allowed surrounding countries to usurp their share of the land. Prussia had converted to Protestantism in the early to mid-1500s, but since that time it had become a nominal religion.

The Müllers were classed among the aristocrats. Herr Müller had strange ideas about teaching his sons the value of wealth. He gave the two boys various sums of money, not that they might spend it, but save it. From time to time he asked them if they still had the money. Invariably, George had spent some of his and then had to steal to make up the amount. It was often the taxes that Herr Müller had collected for the government that George stole. The beatings he received for this were many.

Being from a notable Prussian family, Herr Müller wanted the best education for his eldest son. Between the ages of eleven and sixteen, George

was sent to the Halberstadt Cathedral Classical School in preparation for a university training. The idea was that he could train to become a clergyman and then keep his father in a comfortable way of life in his old age.

George had other ideas. He spent some time studying, but he also wasted time reading unsuitable novels and indulging in ‘sinful practices’. His life of deceit and theft increased. In 1819 his father handed him some money for confirmation (it was customary for clergymen to charge a ‘confirmation fee’); but when George went to the priest to confess his sins, he only handed over a twelfth of the money.

Matters grew worse.

‘Have you seen my sons?’ Herr Müller enquired of all he met in the town. ‘Where is George? He needs to come home. His mother has died.’

George had spent the evening drinking and playing cards in a tavern until two in the morning. He had known his mother was ill, but he was too selfish to care. When he was at last discovered he was wandering the streets drunk and unable to comprehend the news he was given.

As George sobered up, he was appalled at his callous behaviour and endeavoured to improve his ways and on many evenings stayed in instead of going out drinking. But in his own strength, it proved impossible to reform.

Six weeks after his confirmation, he went to Brunswick and there became attracted to a young lady who was a Roman Catholic. With his Protestant upbringing, this friendship would bring George into further conflict with his father.

Back at the Cathedral School his wayward habits continued. He spent time playing the piano and guitar, activities which took him from his studies. His thieving continued as well. On one occasion he even stole the daily allowance of a piece of stale bread from a soldier who was staying at his lodgings. George had plenty, but the soldier would have been very hungry.

When George was sixteen in 1821, his father got an appointment at Schoenebeck, near Magdeburg.

‘Could I be enrolled at the Classical School of Magdeburg?’ George asked. His only reason was to try to leave his sins behind and make a fresh start.

But he wasn't really interested in any study and as he left Halberstadt it was planned that he should stay at Heimersleben until Michaelmas. He then decided he wanted to stay until Easter, even though his father insisted that he take private tuition from Dr Nagel, a learned clergyman. Sometimes George went out to collect the taxes on behalf of his father, but he still kept part of the money to spend on himself.

In November he went to Magdeburg with the express purpose of visiting his Roman Catholic young lady. He then moved on to Brunswick and for a short time he stayed with his uncle until he threw George out because of his loose behaviour.

Although he had little money of his own, George stayed at expensive hotels, hoping to impress others. When he couldn't pay at one, he moved on to another. At one hotel, when they found he couldn't pay, he was asked to leave his clothes as a security before they threw him out.

He then walked six miles to Wolfenbittel, a charming seventeenth-century city in the heart of Lower Saxony, with a medieval castle and a number of hotels. Without any means of paying, Müller stayed at one of the hotels. When he tried to leave without paying, he was arrested and thrown into prison.