

Apprentice thief

George picked up a sheet of paper and pushed his notebook to the side. Scribbling down a list of figures, he added it up, scored it out and shook his head. After thinking for a minute he grinned and wrote down several more figures. This time when he worked out their total he laughed aloud then copied them into his notebook. The boy was only just in time. Herr Müller opened the door and came in.

‘Well,’ his father asked, sitting opposite his son, ‘have you got your pocket money sums done?’

‘Yes Dad,’ he said, handing the book over.

‘That’s good,’ Herr Müller said, ‘very good.’

George turned to the window to hide his grin from his father. Then, taking a deep breath, he turned round.

‘Dad,’ he began, ‘why do you make me write down everything I spend my pocket money on? Fritz and Fredrick just laugh at me. It’s not fair!’

Herr Müller smiled.

‘Come, George,’ he answered, ‘sit down and I’ll explain why.’

The boy’s heart sank.

‘Yuck!’ he moaned inside himself. ‘I want to go out to play and dad’s going to talk for ages about money.’

‘As you know,’ his father began, ‘in the course of my work I discuss money with many people. Some of them know exactly where every penny is, how much is invested, the exact figure they have in the bank, how much has been spent, and on what. These are the people I admire ...’

‘Fritz and Fredrick will go away if I don’t get out soon,’ George thought angrily.

‘... and respect,’ went on his father. ‘And there are others whose accounts are a shambles. They know when I am coming to collect their taxes, and before I arrive they dash together some figures thinking I won’t notice what they’ve done. But I can see through them every time.’

George had to feign a fit of coughing to cover up for the laughter that threatened to erupt.

‘That is why,’ his father continued, ‘I have always given you and your brother more money than boys your age might expect. It is a good discipline to have money, to learn how to use it, and to keep accurate accounts. This little duty which I insist...’

Fixing his eyes on his father’s face, George let his mind wander. He too was interested in money.

‘I wish I’d lots and lots of money like the people Dad’s talking about,’ he thought. ‘I’d buy a clockwork train set and a battalion of tin soldiers and lots of sweets and ...’

‘... so, George, the keeping of accounts is a necessity in every walk of life...’

‘If Dad’s so clever,’ the boy wondered, ‘why didn’t he know I’d made up my pocket money sums?’

‘... even Lutheran priests need to keep accounts, and as that is what your mother and I hope you will...’

‘If I took some of Dad’s tax money I could buy sweets and share them with Fritz and Fredrick. They wouldn’t laugh at me then.’

George smiled at the thought.

‘You find this amusing?’ his father asked.

The boy jumped.

‘No Dad.’

Rising to his feet, Herr Müller patted his son on the back, ‘You’ll continue with your pocket money sums then?’

The nine year old nodded dutifully.

Over and over again George slipped coins from his father’s tax money into his pocket.

‘Sit down, George,’ Herr Müller demanded one day.

The boy sat, turned on an expression of absolute innocence, and waited.

‘Did you, or did you not, remove money from my desk?’

George, whose deceit had made him a splendid actor, looked shocked at the thought.

Staring Herr Müller straight in the eye, he answered, ‘No Dad, I didn’t.’

‘Come here.’

George walked across the room, ignoring the discomfort in his foot.

Maintaining his hurt expression he submitted to his father's search. Finding nothing in his pockets, or any other part of his clothing, Herr Müller sat back in his chair.

'Take off your shoes,' he ordered.

George bent forward and took off one shoe. His father felt his sock and found nothing.

'Easy now,' the boy said to himself, as he undid the lace in his other shoe and slipped his foot out. This sock was searched and nothing found. Very gently he pushed his toes back into the shoe.

'What was that?' Herr Müller bellowed, hearing the chink of coins.

George nearly fell over as his father snatched his shoe. And he could do nothing at all to prevent being found out.

Herr Müller looked at the coins as they tipped on to the floor.

'I suppose,' he said angrily, 'you did not notice these. And I suppose that you think I have not missed money in the past. From which I further suppose that you concluded your father was a fool. Instead of which, young man, you are the fool, taking the money I'd laid as a trap. And for your foolishness and dishonesty you are now going to be severely punished.'

After he had paid the painful price of his thefts George left the room. As he did so, father and son had

very different thoughts. Herr Müller congratulated himself on teaching his son a lesson he would remember.

‘I’ll not get caught again,’ the boy decided. ‘I’ll show him that I’m cleverer than he is!’

One year later, in 1815, George and his brother were sent to Halberstadt, to the Cathedral Classical School there. This was the first step, as far as Herr Müller was concerned, in George’s training for the ministry of the Lutheran church. But, while the boy studied enough to satisfy his teachers, there was nothing further from his mind than living the kind of life that would be expected of a trainee minister.

‘Oh my head,’ George groaned as he wakened one Sunday morning.

‘You’re not the only one with a headache,’ Hermann, his room-mate, growled. ‘It took me hours to get back to sleep after you crashed in at 2 o’clock.’

‘If you’d come with us you wouldn’t be complaining. What a night we had,’ remembered George from somewhere in the fuzziness of his brain. ‘We played cards until our wrists were tired holding them then we gave our arms some exercise with beer tankards. And the jokes we told! There were some good looking girls around too. There was one with long blonde ...’

‘Shut up, Müller, you’re a disgrace! Anyone would think you were twenty four instead of fourteen.’

George jumped to his feet. 'It's Sunday! I've got religious instruction!'

He looked in the mirror.

'I look like death warmed up,' he moaned, splashing cold water on his face and running his fingers through his hair.

Hermann glared at him. 'You've got a nerve, going to a confirmation class when you're hardly sober enough to have a religious thought in your head.'

George winked. 'The priest won't notice. His mind will be on his lunch.'

'Don't judge everyone by your own standards,' the other boy retorted.

'Phew, I'm glad that's over.' George slumped on his bed when he came back from his class. 'I've had enough religion to do me for a month!'

Hermann said nothing, but nodded in the direction of the window.

George turned round.

'Father! What are you doing here?'

Herr Müller looked at his son. 'I've come to take you and your brother home.'

'Home? Why? What's wrong?'

George's father struggled to find words. 'It's your mother. She died last night. I'm taking you home to her funeral.'

The boy sat down in a daze.

Suddenly George's night out flashed before his eyes. Had his mother died when he was drinking, or

gambling, or was it when he had his arm round the blonde girl? He felt sick.

‘Pack your things,’ Herr Müller said. ‘We’ll have to hurry.’

Far from being brought to his senses by his loss, George Müller’s behaviour grew worse. Just a few days before his confirmation he was guilty of immorality. And, two days later, when he had to confess his sins to a priest, he only gave him a twelfth of the money his father had sent for the priest’s fee. On the Sunday after Easter 1820 George was confirmed, making a profession of faith in God, and taking the Lord’s Supper. A little of the seriousness of the occasion affected him, enough to make him stay at home for the afternoon and consider his lifestyle.

Six weeks later George went on holiday to his father’s sister’s home in Brunswick. While he was there he met a young girl to whom he became very attached. Returning to his studies he found himself easily distracted. Playing the guitar or piano, reading novels and drinking in taverns all seemed much more enjoyable. ‘I really must make the effort,’ he told himself often, usually when he had run out of money and could not afford to go out anyway. But his resolutions came to nothing at all. So unwisely did he spend his money that he was once so hungry he stole food from a prisoner who was under house arrest in his lodgings.

‘Father,’ said George, when he was 16 years old, ‘when you go to your new post at Schoenebeck, may I

leave the Cathedral School and oversee the alterations on the house at Heimersleben?’

Herr Müller agreed to his son being there for a few months.

‘Now I’ll be able to live a better life,’ the teenager thought. ‘It was just the company I kept that led me astray.’

At first the work kept George busy, but after a short time he found he had not enough to do and he slipped into his old habits again. Then, having time on his hands, he became involved in the less savoury things that went on round about him. When his time at Heimersleben was nearly over he approached his father again.

‘May I remain until Easter?’ he asked. ‘Dr Nagal would teach me Latin and I could take some pupils of my own.’

Knowing Dr Nagal, a local clergyman, to be a wise and learned man as well as a good friend, Herr Müller agreed.

‘You will also act on my behalf,’ he told his son, ‘collecting the taxes in this area, giving receipts and keeping accurate accounts which you will send to me along with the money.’

George agreed, and it was his downfall. Accomplished thief that he was, the temptation to line his own pockets with his father’s money was too much for him. He did collect the money. And he was careful always to give receipts. But much of it never reached his father. When asked why this one and that one had not paid, George

would reply, with his usual innocence, that he didn't know why, all he knew was that they had not paid.

George decided to have a November holiday.

'After all,' he reasoned, 'Father will never know. He's safely out of the way in Schoenebeck.'

He took as much money as he could lay hands on, told his tutor and pupils a pack of lies and headed for Brunswick, and the girl he had fallen in love with. Wishing to impress her he stayed in an expensive hotel, spent money like water, and wasted the days away. Just one week later he was penniless.

'I know what I'll do,' he decided, being unwilling to leave his girlfriend, 'I'll invite myself to stay at my uncle's home.'

But within a week his uncle had had enough. 'I do not wish you to remain here any longer,' he told his nephew.

Having packed his things, the teenager moved on. Incapable of learning a lesson, George moved into yet another expensive hotel where he spoiled himself for a further week.

'I should be grateful if you would settle your account,' said the hotel-keeper one day. He was becoming a little suspicious. George made an excuse. 'Then perhaps,' the man went on, 'you could give me your passport as a guarantee.'

'Passport,' thought George, 'not only have I no money, I haven't a passport either.'

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ he blurted out. ‘I’ll make arrangements to settle with you.’

But, as he could think of no way of paying his debt, George had to leave his best clothes as security and move out.

‘Where do I go from here?’ he wondered, walking out of Brunswick. ‘How far will I need to walk before news of my debts will be left behind?’

For six miles he trudged along the road, stopping eventually at the inn in Wolfenbüttel. As the walk had made him hungry and thirsty he ate well and drank heartily, totally disregarding his empty pockets.

‘I’d better make a run for it now before anyone becomes suspicious,’ he decided two days later. He leaned out of his room window and considered his options.

‘It’s too high to jump down from here,’ he decided, ‘certainly in the dark, and I’d be seen if I tried during the day. I’m just going to have to bluff my way out of it.’

The following morning, in broad daylight, he walked casually across the inn’s yard and out the other side.

‘I’m nearly there,’ he said to himself, ‘take it gently.’ Glancing behind him and seeing nobody there, he broke into a run.

‘Herr Müller,’ a voice called. ‘Herr Müller, come back!’

‘I’ve had it if I go back, but they’ll catch me if I go on, maybe even with the dog.’ George thought quickly. ‘There’s nothing else for it, I’m done for.’

The innkeeper came out to meet him.

‘Going off without settling your account, were you?’

George considered his answer. Would he try to bluff his way out, or did he for once have to confess that was exactly what he had intended doing. Deciding to trust the innkeeper’s good nature he explained that he had no money on him. But the innkeeper was not good-natured. He had George arrested and escorted to the police between two soldiers. After three hours of questioning he was put in prison.

‘How did I get myself into this mess?’ he asked himself, as his cell door clanged shut behind him.

It was 18th December 1821. George Müller was sixteen years old. And in those sixteen years he had learned to lie, steal, drink, gamble and lead an immoral life. His future looked bleak.